A SEMIOTIC READING OF GENESIS 1

ISAAC SERRANO III

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

DOCTOR OF THEOLOGY

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Dedication

To my family: the Serrano Six

You *image* the goodness of the Creator to me daily.

PART I: SEMIOTICS AND THE INTERPRETIVE LANDSCAPE

Introduction 5

Semiotics and Interpretive Issues 7

The Problem of Meaning and Intent 9

The Problem of Myth 13

The Problem of Interpretive Wars 17

The Problem of Science, Faith, and Belief in the Modern World 19

Thesis and the Task of this Paper 20

PART II: A SEMIOTIC READING OF GENESIS 1

Water as Semiotic Reality 21

The Formless Void as Semiotic Reality 26

Two Semiotic Poles 28

God 35

Day and Night as Semiotic Realities 38

Earth and Sky as Semiotic Realities.. 39

Trees and Plants as Semiotic Realities. 43

The Rise of Land as Semiotic Reality 52

Sun and Moon as Semiotic Realities 55

Sea Monsters as Semiotic Realities 61

The Ultimate Sign: Humans as Semiotic Realities 67

Understandings of the Image of God 70

Gospel Semiotics in the Man and Woman 87

The Semiotics of “Us”. 92

The Semiotics of Rest 103

PART III: SEMIOTICS AND A WAY FORWARD

Monotheism, Goodness, and Human Flourishing 121

Contribution One: Apologetics 128

Contribution Two: Future Biblical Interpretation 134

Contribution Three: Church Unity 137

Conclusion 139

PART I: SEMIOTICS AND THE INTERPRETIVE LANDSCAPE

When approaching the creation account found in Genesis 1, any attempt at interpretation is doing far more than merely interpreting the first chapter of sacred scripture. This is because Genesis 1 is not simply telling the reader some information about the past. The creation story creates the *narratival landscape* in which the rest of scripture will walk in; one dare not miss it.[1] This opening narrative puts forth a world and a world-view. It creates the world in which all other biblical stories will live and move and have their being.

In fiction, the origin story of a character reveals much of who a character actually is. It reveals why they operate the way they do. If one is going to understand the narrative arc of a character, one must understand the beginning of that arc. For ancient people, a creation account ran a parallel function as it began the shaping of a people's world-view and their understanding of reality. When it comes to understanding oneself and one's purpose in the world, origin stories are the starting point.

Origin stories have a deep psychological and emotional power that stirs the human spirit. Think about the many books and movies we love most, and how they often have the discovery of a lost origin story as the centerpiece of the plot. There is a profound emotional resonance we share with characters in the fictional world as they discover who they are and where they came from. If this type of power is observed with mere characters in a fictional reality, how much more powerful could the true origin story of the cosmos be? What one believes about the beginning of all things ultimately shapes one's understanding of reality. This is why the Genesis creation account is both world and world-view building.

[1] In a similar sense, one does not want to miss the opening introduction and anthem of a Star Wars film. In a brief moment, the narrative takes its form.

The creation account found in Genesis 1 is immensely ladened with meaning. It is seeking not solely to explain a few pieces of information about God and creation, but it is ultimately laying the foundation for the entire biblical narrative. How one understands this origin story is of utmost importance. Indeed, how one views themselves and where they stand in relationship to God are given first meaning from this story. Questions like: Who are we? Where are we going? What is an individual's purpose? What is the collective purpose of humanity? All of these questions and more, begin to find their shape in Genesis 1.

Getting Genesis 1 right is thus, of critical importance. I realize that when I say "right" I am already erroneous in oversimplifying the issue. Genesis 1, like much for the Bible, is inexhaustible. One can spend their life on page one of the Bible and never reach the bottom of the well. By saying "right" I mean to use the word in a sense of approximation. We need to sit as close as possible to the intended primary meanings of the text. This is not to say that primary meaning is the only meaning that exists in the text. The story of creation is like a multifaceted diamond; you can rotate it and view it from countless angles and allow light to hit it differently to create all sorts of new beauty. It is however, from the primary meaning of the text that the new beauty radiates.

There are, however, interpretive landmines laid across the narrative floor. These landmines come from many different sources. The modern reader exists in a different culture and is removed by thousands of years from the composition of the Genesis creation account. Additionally, as we will address later, the interpretation of Genesis often takes place on a battleground and one's interpretation oftentimes serves as a litmus test for orthodoxy. The "waters" of Genesis are chaotic to say the least. However, the danger of not diving into those

waters far outweighs the risk. If any individual truly wants to understand the scriptures, then they must wade into the waters of "In the Beginning."

SEMIOTICS AND INTERPRETIVE ISSUES

There are many schools of thought when it comes to biblical interpretation. Most use a variety of methods and tools when interpreting the Bible. There are historical-grammatical readings, canonical readings, allegorical readings, and others. In order to properly understand a text in a Christian sense, one must be open to using more than one interpretive method. For example, concerning Genesis 1, a historical-grammatical approach may be helpful, but you will never conclude that creation is "through and for Jesus," with the historical-grammatical method alone.[2] Reading Genesis with a canonical lens and reading Colossians 1 back into the story will give you the fullest "Christian" understanding of the text. Many of the debates today relate to the interpretive methods used. It is my belief that traditional historical, grammatical, and canonical methods are extremely useful. The original author and audience matter immensely, and the text in relationship to the canon as a whole matters as well. Nevertheless, more is needed to navigate the narratival landscape of the biblical stories. A tool that can righty orient our eyes to better see what the text is attempting to do is needed. The additional tool, I suggest, is semiotics.

Semiotics, simply stated, is the study of signs and symbols and the meaning they communicate. Semiosis therefore occurs, when a sign communicates a meaning, that is not the sign itself. For example, a red hexagon with the word "stop" written on it, is not just a red hexagon with the word "stop" on it. The sign points to greater meaning. In this case, the meaning includes rules and laws that have been codified by the culture the sign is observed in. Important to note, the meaning the sign is pointing to may be dependent on the culture in which it is being

[2] See Colossians 1:16.

observed. For instance, a red hexagon seen five hundred years ago in East Asia may not have the same meaning it does in the modern Western World.

Additionally, semiosis can take place in many different types of sign systems. It is not something that is bound to one domain like literature alone. Sign language is a sign system; so is body language. A smile is a sign that points to greater meaning than mere muscle movement. If one encounters a woman with a head covering, there may be a host of religious meaning embedded in the sign. In fact, if you interpret a head covering simply as a way to cover skin, depending on the cultural context, you might be missing the majority of the meaning. The semiotic meaning is of greater importance than the observable reality of someone covering their head. A concrete observable reality may exist, but that reality may point to a greater reality of meaning.

All of this is important as we approach the text of scripture. An older interpretive method applied to Genesis 1 might ask what the word "sun" means. Semiotics asks, how does the "sun" function as a sign? Is there additional meaning that the word "sun" is pointing toward. Furthermore, the semiotic question can meet the historical question and ask, how did the "sun" function as a sign in the Ancient Near East? What did the sun point to or stand in place of for the Ancient Near Eastern audience of the bible? Once we look at Genesis 1 with an additional semiotic lens, new insights begin to rise to the surface.

Semiotic readings of Genesis 1 are needed for a number of reasons. First, as we shall discuss, there is much division in the North American Church regarding proper interpretation of the creation account. Could semiotics help build unity in the church setting? Second, modern scientific conclusions are harming the trustworthiness of the creation account. Can semiotics help restore trust in the story?

However, before addressing semiotics and their use in interpretation regarding Genesis 1, several issues must be addressed. We must address meaning and myth and their place in creation accounts. We must also look at the interpretive wars regarding the creation account. Finally, an examination of the problems raised by modern science must be discussed. These issues can significantly hinder the reader from seeing what the text is attempting to communicate.

THE PROBLEM OF MEANING AND INTENT

C. John Collins states, "One's view of the Biblical text depends on one's interpretive approach, and generally the interpretive approach is assumed, not warranted."[3] He subsequently brings attention to C.S. Lewis's point in his introduction to Milton's "Paradise Lost" where he writes, "The first qualification for judging any piece of workman-ship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it is, what it was intended to do, and how it is meant to be used. After that has been discovered the temperance reformer may decide that the corkscrew was made for a bad purpose, and the communist may think the same about the cathedral."[4] Collins thus, boils down Lewis's elegance into three critical questions for the interpreter when approaching a text. He lists: What is it? What was it intended to do? How is it meant to be used?[5]

Today, many are looking for answers from Genesis, that Genesis does not set out to give. People want Genesis to do things it did not set out to do. Much of this confusion arises because there is a misunderstanding of what the creation account is, what it is intending to do, and how it is meant to be used. Creation accounts birthed in the Ancient Near East do not operate the way

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[3] C. John Collins, *Reading Genesis Well : Navigating History, Poetry, Science, and Truth in Genesis 1-11* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2018), 17.

[4] C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 1.

[5] Collins, 35.

modern people would like them to. The questions being asked by modern people may be good ones, but Genesis is not concerned with those sorts of questions. Genesis is answering different kinds of questions, and much larger questions for that matter. Questions that shape worldview and how one sees reality. Genesis 1 is attempting to speak truth to the most fundamental components of reality and the most fundamental yearnings of the human heart.

These dilemmas can also be articulated with Speech Act Theory. Speech Act Theory maintains that there are three steps in a communication. First, the locution, which is the form of the actual words spoke. Second, the illocution, which is the intended effect of the words. And thirdly, the perlocution, the actual effect of the words. For example, I may ask my child, "did you eat your vegetables?" My child may reply with, "of course dad, so what do I get tonight?" I, as the father, might have previously made an agreement with my child that if they ate their vegetables then I would provide them with a special dessert. This "contract" is embedded into the illocution and it is my desire that my child would respond the way they did. This takes place so that the perlocution, which is a response about dessert, now occurs.

What Speech Act Theory teaches is that the mere formation of the words may not mean what they literally mean. There may be meaning beyond the simple locution. So, to faithfully interpret a communication form, one must look for the intended goal of said communication. If one disregards the intent of the communication, and just takes it at "face-value" one may be acting more recklessly than one who sees meaning beyond the concrete words expressed.

John Collins, again, is helpful here as he draws upon C.S. Lewis's ideas on literature found in an essay entitled "The Language of Religion."[6] He states:

> We must also take into account what kind of language use we find in the locution. Is it low or high? Is it technical or lay? Is it conversational or pedantic—that is, what is the

[6] C. S. Lewis and Walter Hooper, *Christian Reflections* (London,: Bles, 1967), 159.

> register and style? What relationship between speaker and audience seems to lie behind it? What degree of detail does the speaker expect the audience to apply, and what background knowledge does he or she intend for them to invoke? An essay that Lewis never finished, "The Language of Religion," can help us. The essay expands some of the material Lewis had contributed to The Personal Heresy.[7] Lewis invites us to consider the following three sentences:
>
> 1. It was very cold.
> 2. There were thirteen degrees of frost.
> 3. Ah, bitter chill it was!
> The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
> the hare limped trembling through the frozen grass,
> and silent was the flock in wooly fold:
> numb'd were the Beadsman's fingers.
>
> Each of these sentences describes a winter night, but they do so in different ways. The first sentence is what we can call "ordinary language"—it is how English speakers talk in regular, day-to-day speech. The second sentence is what we can call "scientific," because it is what people need when they are concerned with measurements that can be tested with an instrument; it allows them to predict various effects of the cold on the animals and plants. The third sentence is "poetic": it conveys more of what it would be like to experience that cold night.[8]

All three statements can be true, but they are speaking in three different ways. More important, they highlight different points of meaning. The authorial intent of statement two, is most concerned about scientific measurement. It by no means denies the experiential reality of it being a cold night made by statement one. It is however, not primarily concerned with that. Likewise, if I were to tell my family, "it is going to be really cold tonight for dinner," it is not to deny the reality of a specific scientific measurement of temperature, it is however, communicating my first concern, in that I want my family to dress warm.

At this point, the modern reader can find themselves hindered by their cultural environment. Sometimes, when these types of distinctions in language are made, an accusation

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[7] E. M. W. Tillyard and C. S. Lewis, *The Personal Heresy, a Controversy* (London, New York etc.: Oxford university press, 1939).

[8] Collins, 61-62.

of compromise arises. Some people would say this is a sort of "get out of jail free" card. The point being that every time science proves a point of the biblical text inaccurate, Christian theologians have this card to play to get out of the dilemma. For example, if the Bible says that the earth has "four corners" the Christian theologian can just say this is religious language and not bother with the inaccuracy of the claim.[9] Many see this as a maneuver that modern Christian readers employ to avoid the issue. However, interpreters have always dealt with the Bible in this manner. Interpreters have always observed the differences in types of language. This is simply not a recent strategy of modern apologists as they encounter the Bible in light of modern science. Christian interpreters throughout history have approached sacred scripture in this manner. There is a modern snobbery at work to believe people of the past simply used language in a monolithic manner. For example, John Calvin writing nearly five hundred years ago commented on the creation of the sun and moon:

> Moses makes two great luminaries; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons, that the star of Saturn, which, on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. Here lies the difference; Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labour whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend. Nevertheless, this study is not to be reprobated, nor this science to be condemned, because some frantic persons are wont boldly to reject whatever is unknown to them. For astronomy is not only pleasant, but also very useful to be known: it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God. Wherefore, as ingenious men are to be honoured who have expended useful labour on this subject, so they who have leisure and capacity ought not to neglect this kind of exercise. Nor did Moses truly wish to withdraw us from this pursuit in omitting such things as are peculiar to the art; but because he was ordained a teacher as well of the unlearned and rude as of the learned, he could not otherwise fulfil his office than by descending to this grosser method of instruction. Had he spoken of things generally unknown, the uneducated might have pleaded in excuse that such subjects were beyond their capacity. Lastly, since the Spirit of God here opens a common school for all, it is not surprising that he should chiefly choose those subjects which would be intelligible to all. If the astronomer inquires respecting the actual dimensions of the stars, he will find the moon to be less than Saturn; but this is something abstruse, for to the sight it appears

[9] Isa 11:12, Eze 7:2, Rev 7:1

> differently. Moses, therefore, rather adapts his discourse to common usage. For since the Lord stretches forth, as it were, his hand to us in causing us to enjoy the brightness of the sun and moon, how great would be our ingratitude were we to close our eyes against our own experience? There is therefore no reason why janglers should deride the unskilfulness of Moses in making the moon the second luminary; for he does not call us up into heaven, he only proposes things which lie open before our eyes. Let the astronomers possess their more exalted knowledge; but, in the meantime, they who perceive by the moon the splendour of night, are convicted by its use of perverse ingratitude unless they acknowledge the beneficence of God.[10]

Calvin clearly understood that there are different types of language that one could employ. He knew the bible was not to be forced into one set and always read in the exact same manner. The flexibility of the text has always been known.

The question for the interpreter is: what is the language being employed attempting to communicate? The answer to that question is primary and most important. Important to note though, if an interpreter makes a conclusion about primary meaning, that does not mean other peripheral meanings are falsified. It simply means they are not the main point. One of the major tasks of this paper is to discover primary authorial intent. In discovering primary meaning, that is not to disregard other points that can be made, it is however an attempt to focus on what mattered most to the author. The question is, what would the author of this text want his or her reader to hear. What is his desired perlocution? This leads us to the next problem.

THE PROBLEM OF MYTH

Often, especially in conservative circles, there is a gut level angst when speaking of any biblical text with the word myth. The fear is that once one adopts any sense of mythological meaning in the text, then one has ceased believing that the biblical account is "real" in any true

[10] John Calvin and John King, Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 86–87.

sense. This, however, is unnecessary when one adopts a proper understanding of myth and how it relates to creation accounts.

Myth does not have to mean *not-real*. Nor does it have to mean something that is opposed to scientific conclusions. Myth dabbles in something much deeper than mere observable fact. Myth is a narrative embodiment of truths so deep that the best means by which to communicate them is metaphor, story, and poetry. In other words, simple propositions cannot carry the weight of the type of meaning trying to be communicated. Some truths go so deep in expositing the human experience that only metaphor and narrative seem to be the appropriate channels.

This is not to say this is how everyone uses the word "myth." There indeed are people who do use the word in a diminutive sense. They use it to mean "not-real," or something ancient people believed, but now we all know better. Myth however, in the way the ancient world approached creation stories, does not have to function in that manner. John Walton explains part of the apprehension toward myths like this:

> People define and understand "myth" in a number of different ways. It is generally understood that myths are stories in which the gods are the main characters. Since most people do not believe that "the gods" exist, they consider these stories fanciful and fictional. The Old Testament then becomes disputed territory, since, in contrast to those who believe in Marduk or Baal, a greater number of people believe that Yahweh exists and are uncomfortable with those who classify the Old Testament in the same category as the mythology of the ancient Near East.[11]

However, a creation myth does not have to be fiction, it can be non-fiction in the purest of ways. It is attempting to speak truth that is truer than that which is simply empirically

[11] Walton, John H.. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. Location 630

verifiable.[12] In a quote often falsely attributed to Einstein, William Cameron said, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."[13] More recently, psychologist Jordan Peterson articulated the potency of myths and origin stories when he said, "In the mythological world, what matters is what's important. The world is made out of what matters, not of matter. It requires a very different orientation."[14]

Walton further adds a helpful way of understanding how myths functioned in the ancient world. He says:

> Perhaps some resolution can be reached if we consider the basic function of mythology beyond the observation that it concerns the gods. We should ask the question of why a culture should consider stories about the gods to be important. A Babylonian would consider the myths to be important because they offered explanations of how the world functioned. The inhabitants of Mesopotamia would not have considered their myths to be fanciful or fictional, though they would not have considered a myth the same as a court chronicle. "The Sumerians seem to have perceived mythological reality as historically actual."[15] The gods were real to the ancients, and their stories gave account of the gods and the world in ways that were important for understanding the world and life in general.[16]

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[12] Christopher Kaczor. *Lewis vs. Peterson: Is myth truth or fantasy?* Angelusnews.com. https://angelusnews.com/news/christopher-kaczor/lewis-vs-peterson-is-myth-truth-or-fantasy (accessed May 1st, 2019).

[13] Good Reads, "Informal Sociology Quotes," accessed 11/5/2020. https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/13084306-informal-sociology-a-casual-introduction-to-sociological-thinking.

[14] The quote was taken from the podcast "The Art of Manliness." A transcript is hosted however of the episode on the podcast's website. https://www.artofmanliness.com/articles/podcast-335-using-power-myths-live-flourishing-life/

[15] Dina Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2003), 56.

[16] John Walton, *Ancient near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 43.

A myth then, to the Ancient Near Eastern mind, is not something that is not-real, a myth is attempting to explain the operations of ultimate reality. Jan Assmann points this out: "The theme of myth was not the *essence of the deities*, but rather—and this point seems decisive to me and is probably valid not only of the Egyptian mythology—the essence of reality."[17]

This will be incredibly important moving forward. The modern mind is often tempted to make either-or decisions regarding myth. For example, one might say, Genesis is either true historically, or it is a myth and none of it really happened. One might look at the Hebrew word אָדָם/Adam and believe the text is talking about a single historical figure named Adam. A different interpreter might rightly point out that אָדָם/Adam literally translates to human, mankind, or humanity. This interpreter might conclude that Adam is merely a mythical figure symbolically representing the whole human race. These two interpreters will debate and do their best to convince the other of their wrong. Indeed, there are many theological implications at hand with what one decides. However, if one understands how Adam functions semiotically, one does not have to force themselves into an either-or position. Remember, in semiosis, a sign can point to something beyond itself. Adam might indeed be a historical figure, but he is also functioning semiotically. Adam is a sign that points to or stands in place of all of humanity. Adam can be very much a real and historical figure, but still be signifying the signified, namely the archetypical reality of the first human.

This is why so much of scripture will look back at him in a representative role. There is a real debate to be had about the historical Adam, but from the text alone, there exists the space for

[17] Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, 1st English-language ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). 112.

the two interpretations to occupy similar territory. In other words, it is my hope that semiotics can build a bridge in these interpretive decisions.

What then is myth's relationship to Genesis 1 and how can semiotics bring together historical realities and mythical elements while remaining faithful to the text? First, recall that myth is trying to explain ultimate reality and how it functions. The ancient person was not primarily concerned about material origins, but how the world operated.[18] If you are dependent upon rain for survival, you are less concerned about the atomic composition of H20, and more concerned about where the rain comes from and how one can get it to water your crops. Semiotics can say, yes H20 is real and not a mere mythological element, but what water points to, the semiotic meaning, may be more important to an ancient mind.

In particular to the controversies around the historical Adam; Adam might be a historical figure, but if he is merely a historical figure one is missing the point. Adam, by his very name is an occurrence of semiosis pointing to something more than just one individual. If one believes the story of Adam and Eve is just a story about two individuals, then there is a terrible missing of the point. There is an archetypical nature to the character of Adam, historical or not. Semiotics rightly orients our eyes to see that which the character of Adam is pointing towards.

THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETIVE WARS

The issues of interpretation do not stay isolated in the academic world, they spill over into the life of the Church. There exist massive gulfs in belief regarding the creation account across the North American Church. There is six-day literal creationism, progressive creationism, gap theories, theistic evolution and more. An even greater problem lies not in the diversity of

[18] John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis 1* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2009), 25.

thought, but in the war waged between parties. For many, this is not an area that churches can agree to disagree on. One can easily find themselves on the outside of their own church for their views of creation.[19] This creates much division and fighting among churches.

It is also important to note that these arguments are not petty squabbles. The debate matters. As many would point out, Genesis has direct implications for virtually every area of theology. In other words, it is not simply a concern for creation and anthropology, but all sectors of theology are affected.

For example, Genesis 1 matters for soteriological purposes. What if there is no "first Adam?" What if there is no true first couple? Would that change one's view of Paul's words when he states in Romans 5:12 (English Standard Version) "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." Likewise, Romans 5:15 states, "But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many." In both these texts, there are soteriological implications on what one believes about the historical Adam. Currently, scientific consensus tells us there was never a first couple and that modern humanity finds their original parents in over ten thousand individuals.[20] Going further, one can see that this deals not with just soteriology, but anthropology and hamartiology. Sin, salvation, life, and everything in between are all bound up together.

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[19] As a Pastor, I have personally experienced this. Congregation members have felt extremely passionate about what they hold and have made it very clear on what they think I ought to hold to.

[20] Dennis Venema and Scot Mcknight, *Adam and the Genome: Reading Scripture after Genetic Science* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2017).

All of this is to say, that when people debate over Genesis, the debate is not merely an issue of how the world was created. Again, origin stories give meaning and purpose to the world and humanity. They lay out the framework from which all other theological work must be done. So, for many people, salvation is actually at stake when getting Genesis wrong.[21]

This makes the divisions regarding the creation account all the more volatile. The temperature is extremely hot, and for many churches has boiled over. If the Church is to honor the commands of unity in scripture, much more work remains to be accomplished. The interpretive task is not a mere academic one, it ultimately is done for the life of the Church. My hope is that semiotics can help contribute to a path forward.

THE PROBLEM OF SCIENCE, FAITH AND BELIEF IN THE MODERN WORLD

Many Christians are doubting their faith and their trust in the bible because they cannot reconcile what scripture records and what modern science records. Many people have given up on Christianity because they see it as incompatible with science. The creation wars have left behind countless casualties. This is particularly pronounced in young people. According to their latest research, the Barna Group records that 49% of churchgoers from Generation Z say, "the church seems to reject most of what science tells us about the world."[22] For the upcoming generation, this actually represents their number one piece of negative feedback, ranking even higher than "the church being a place of hypocrites." Additionally, when looking at Generation Z

[21] For examples of this see Ken Ham's organization "Answers in Genesis." An example of this attitude can be found at https://answersingenesis.org/bible-characters/adam-and-eve/supernatural-creation-adam/

[22] "Atheism Doubles among Generation Z," Barna, accessed 2/3/2021. https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/.

as a whole, only 28% believe science and the bible are complementary.[23] This number has decreased every generation since the Baby Boomers and has seen a significant decrease in both Generation Z and with Millennials. It is clear that this is a pervasive intellectual and emotional problem for those under the age of thirty-five. The confusion over these issues creates a massive pain point for younger generations.

The question at hand is: can semiotics help bridge the divide between current understandings of Geneses 1 and modern science? As demonstrated, this is massively important for today, it however, is also worth pointing out that it is incredibly important for tomorrow as well. The reality is the "scientific consensus" changes; that is the nature of science. Science continues to make hypotheses, test them, and grow in understanding. It is important that one does not tie their understanding of Genesis to "what science says," at a particular moment, because that can change. Again, semiotics can hopefully demonstrate that the primary meaning of the text indeed "sits above" the current state of science in whatever time period one is in.

THESIS AND THE TASK OF THIS PAPER

With these issues in mind, we turn to the specific task at hand. *Can a semiotic reading of Genesis 1 enable us to better orient ourselves in the narrative landscape of Genesis 1, and thus provide a way forward in the interpretive divide, particularly in the North American context?*

Additionally, if semiotics is helping to clarify original authorial intent and meaning, then we should expect to find the rest of scripture looking back at the objects, signs, and symbols, and give them similar meaning. In other words, if the hypothesis is correct, Genesis will become a sort of semiotic dictionary for the rest of Scripture.

[23] Ibid.

The goal then is not to find every golden semiotic exegetical nugget, but rather provide sufficient examples of semiotic meaning in the text to demonstrate the need for a semiotic lens in biblical interpretation. *Putting it succinctly, can a semiotic reading of Genesis 1 aid the Church in the problems surrounding its interpretation that have risen in the modern context?*

PART II: A SEMIOTIC READING OF GENESIS 1

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.[24] Appropriately, we will start our semiotic reading of Genesis 1 at the very beginning. I would however, like to approach this verse working backward, addressing first, all of the elements that set the stage for this "God," to begin his creative work. Once we work through the semiotics of setting in verses 1 and 2, we will turn lastly to "God."

WATER AS SEMIOTIC REALITY

One of the greatest snares the modern world has laid upon the reader is that we might easily see a word like "water" and immediately think H20. Although, the text might indeed be referring to that, often times it is trying to do something much more. Additionally, even if the text is referring to literal H20, H20 can also be pointing to a greater reality. The object might be a sign for something larger. This is certainly the case for water in the opening verses of scripture. When the bible speaks of "water" in its opening verses, it is not referring to the mere chemical composition of the primordial state.

Water plays a significant role in the text of Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts. Out of the chaotic waters come powerful gods and entities that are at war with one another, vying for

[24] Genesis 1:1–2

ultimate power. When ancient people talked about water in their creation accounts, they knew full well they were not just talking about the stream at the end of the village. A look at the Babylonian creation account, the Enuma Elish will be helpful at this point. It is relevant for the present discussion on water, but the inner workings of the story will help beyond this present purpose. The Enuma Elish serves as an introduction to creation accounts in the Ancient Near East. A brief walkthrough will be given, followed by a return to the particular point of water. The Enuma Elish begins:

> "When on high, the heaven had not been named,
> Firm ground below had not been called by name,
> Naught but primordial Apsu, their begetter,
> (And) Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,
> Their waters commingling as a single body.[25]

The story introduces us to two important characters, Apsu and Tiamat. It goes on to say, that as their waters mingled as a single body, new gods begin to emerge. However, rather than a peaceful family forming, the Enuma Elish goes on to say that the children make so much noise and commotion that their father, Apsu, decides that he must be rid of them at all costs. Apsu concludes he must commit deicide and kill his children. He then informs Tiamat of his plan.

However, before Apsu can kill his children, a water god named Ea, defeats Apsu. Tiamat is enraged at Apsu's death and creates an army of god-monsters under the command of her General Kingu to execute revenge. The other gods are full of fear as they begin to realize they cannot defeat Tiamat and her army. One god named Marduk, however, steps into the story. Marduk says he will lead the charge against Tiamat and Kingu on the condition that once victorious, Marduk is given the top position of the henotheistic pantheon.

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[25] James B. Pritchard, *Ancient near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton,: Princeton University Press, 1992; repr., 5th), 60-61.

Eventually, Marduk fights Tiamat and by the power of wind splits the heart of Tiamat. Marduk then takes the corpse of his fallen foe and begins to create the earth. He takes the corpse and rips it into two pieces and creates the firmament above, and with the other half creates the earth below. The firmament above is said to hold back the chaotic waters of Tiamat from breaking through below. Marduk then assigns roles and function for all the other gods:

> He constructed stations for the great gods,
> Fixing their astral likenesses as Images.
> He determined the year by designating the zones;
> He set up three constellations for each of the twelve months.
> After defining the days of the year by means of heavenly figures,
> He founded the station of Nebiru to determine their heavenly bands,
> That none might transgress or fall short.
> Alongside it he set up the stations of Enlil and Ea.
> Having opened up the gates on both sides,
> He strengthened the locks to the left and the right.[26]

As the story continues, one can see how the gods and their functions overlap with their physical representation in the skies:

> After he had appointed the days to Shamash,
> And had established the precincts of night and day.[27]

Different gods are given different responsibilities, but eventually the gods grow tired of their work. This is when Marduk creates humanity. Marduk takes the blood of the fallen general Kingu and crafts humans out of blood to do the work of the gods. People are made to serve the remaining gods, because the gods do not want to work.

Stepping back, contrast this story with the first two verses of Genesis. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the *Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters*.” In

[26] Ibid., 67.

[27] Ibid., 501.

Genesis, there are not multiple gods, there is one. The earth is not constructed out of a dead corpse, God speaks creation into existence. There is no war among the gods, there is the peace of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters. This will be a recurring feature in our ongoing interpretation, the author of Genesis will use similar ideas and concepts from the world he occupied and infuse them with new semiotic meaning. The waters are not the place of chaos and war, they are the place YHWH establishes order.

When one begins to look through the lens of semiotics, water no longer simply means water. Water is a semiotic reality. Myths cannot be read "literally," and for that matter, "non-literal" does not mean not-real. Both sides of the theological spectrum have something to learn here. Conservatives might fear myth, but liberals are certainly mistaken in believing demythologizing somehow removes the "less real" or "less true" elements. Demythologizing something is to try and remove the mythological elements from the event, but those very mythological elements may carry the burden of meaning. In other words, in removing the mythological components, you may be removing that which is most real, most true, and most meaningful. One sees this best when seeing how "water" is used at the other end of the bible.

In the book of the Revelation, chapter twenty-one begins by declaring that there will be "no more sea" in the new creation. The panic sets in for beach lovers everywhere. The reaction is completely unnecessary. What does the *sea* mean? Here, we see what should be expected if Genesis is functioning as a sort of semiotic dictionary for the rest of bible.[28] Both Revelation and apocalyptic literature in general see the sea, as the place of chaos. It is the place from where the

[28] The authors and first readers of the New Testament were saturated in the imagery of the Old Testament. See: Lois Tverberg, *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus: How the Jewish Words of Jesus Can Change Your Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), 146.

beasts rise.[29] It is the abode of the dragon, the serpent of old. If the sea is the chaotic world in which the beasts and monsters who wage war on God's people rise from, then of course in the new creation the sea must be "no more." If you remove the mythological and symbolic meaning of "water" you will fail to miss all that is taking place in the text. Here, semiotics helps the reader focus on the greater meaning of water.

However, something that semiotics make obvious can be completely hidden to those trapped in hermeneutic methodologies that hyper focus on the sign, without the signified. Without the additional lens of semiotics interpreters are prone to make grave mistakes. This is by no means an exaggeration. There are clear examples of this made by highly influential bible teachers.

For example, John Walvoord stated, "Most of the earth is now covered with water, but the new earth apparently will have no bodies of water except for the river mentioned in 22:2."[30] Walvoord is no small name, he was the president of the very influential Dallas Theological Seminary from 1952-1986. An even bigger name, however, forces the text through a literal non-semiotic filter. John MacArthur writes:

> "The sea is emblematic of the present water-based environment. All life on earth is dependent on water for its survival, and the earth is the only known place in the universe where there is sufficient water to sustain life. But believers' glorified bodies will not require water, unlike present human bodies, whose blood is 90 percent water, and whose flesh is 65 percent water. Thus, the new heaven and the new earth will be based on a completely different life principle than the present universe. There will be a river in heaven, not of water, but of the "water of life."[31]

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[29] Dan 7:3, Rev 13:1

[30] John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ; a Commentary* (Chicago,: Moody Press, 1966), 311.

[31] John MacArthur, *Revelation 12-22*, *The Macarthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 2000), 263.

Now, maybe resurrected bodies will not have a composition sharing H20, but that is not the point. The point is, what does water signify in the book of Revelation? Does water signify H20, or does it point to a greater reality? When you cross this and examine how water is used throughout the bible you can see that often times it is doing more in the text than just referring to drinking water. Additionally, as previously stated, even when the text might first be pointing to literal H20, even then, that very real water might be signifying something more. Why do the pigs run into the abyss in Luke? Why does Jesus fall asleep on the waters? Why does Jesus walk on the waters? Why is Jonah cast into the sea? It is because semiotically speaking, water is often much more than water.

The author of Genesis does something remarkable with water. The author knows full well that the waters are often the waters of primordial chaos. What occurs in Genesis would be unique to its contemporary documents. The water is a place of peace, as the Spirit of God hovers over it; the water waits in anticipation for the life-giving creative force of the Sovereign ruler.

THE FORMLESS VOID AS SEMIOTIC REALITY

At the beginning of the creation account there appears to be a description of that which is "without form and void." Modern people tend to think of this as "nothing." However, it is a certain type of *nothing*. And that "nothing" has semiotic meaning.[32] The Hebrew used here is תֹּהוּ וָבֹהוּ/tohu wa-bohu. This is a hendiadys formed out of the two root words תֹּהוּ/formless and בֹּהוּ/void. Throughout the Bible תֹּהוּ has two ways in which it is primarily used. It can refer to a type of "nothingness" or it can refer to chaos, particularly the type of chaos one might encounter

[32] In the German novel turned American Movie, "The Never-Ending Story," it has as its antagonist "The Nothing." However, the nothing is not *nothing*. This "nothing" takes things and makes them nothing.

in the wilderness, and for that matter, the type of chaos in the wilderness that can bring death.[33] For example, Deuteronomy 32:10 speaking of Israel states, "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling *waste of the wilderness*; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye." Israel was in desert chaos, but God found them and saved them from impending death. The second word of the hendiadys, בֹּהוּ appears in isolation in one other place in scripture and refers to emptiness.[34] When these two words come together, however, something new is created. A different type of "nothingness."

This "nothing" is that which exists before God begins his creative act. Before the painter begins his masterpiece, the canvas is "without form and void." Now, we modern people immediately want to know if this "nothing" is materially "something." In other words, is this referring to some type of pre-existing matter? The issue of creation ex-nihilo is an important discussion and I believe God, indeed spoke all things into being. It is not as if matter eternally existed alongside of God. All things that are made are made through Him, and the only thing not made is His being. However, to get bogged down in that question, again misses the point. Tohu wa-bohu/וָבֹהוּ תֹהוּ is the state of the created order before the sovereign God of creation speaks and brings forth life. More to the point, even if "nothing" is materially and literally "nothing" in the text, this "nothing" is not functioning *literarily* as "nothing." This understanding is unlocked because of semiotics. What image is the author trying to communicate to the reader when he speaks of *tohu wa-bohu*?

[33] Gordan John Wenham, vol. 1, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervon Academic, 2014), 15.

[34] Isa 34:11

If one merely thinks about the formless void materially, then one thinks solely of material substance, but if one thinks of it semiotically, the conceptual world opens up. And this is exactly what the biblical authors do. The formless void has semiotic meaning. We see this demonstrated in epic fashion in Jeremiah chapter 4:23-26. In brilliant Hebrew poetry the prophet proclaims:

> I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without *form and void;*
> and to the heavens, and they had no light.
> I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking,
> and all the hills moved to and fro.
> I looked, and behold, there was no man,
> and all the birds of the air had fled.
> I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert,
> and all its cities were laid in ruins
> before the Lord, before his fierce anger.

The prophet depicts the undoing of creation. It is a reversal of the creation week found in Genesis 1. One can map this upon Genesis 1 and see the many parallels. The concept is interesting. The prophet is depicting the destruction of Jerusalem. This destruction comes because of their own sin. The reasons given is that Israel has turned to other gods. What he sees is astounding. The undoing of Israel is told as the undoing of creation. And when you reverse the creation week as so to say, play it backwards, you end with *tohu wa-bohu*. The fate of Israel is like creation before God speaks.

Tohu wa-bohu is not just the absence of material substance, the "nothing" is so much more than that, and it is the semiotic lens that helps our eyes adjust to the proper settings. *Tohu wa-bohu* is the dreadful state of nothingness without a God ready to speak forth new creation. *Tohu wa-bohu* may be nothing materially, but is something narratively and semiotically. The good news for both Genesis 1 and Jeremiah 4 is that the God of Israel does indeed begin to speak new creation.

TWO SEMITOIC POLES

Next, we turn to something that appears in the text slightly before what has been already discussed, but was left till now to address because it flows conceptually alongside of the formless void. The first verse of the bible declared that God, created the "Heavens and the Earth." Two incredibly important movements are taking place, and both help create the foundations for the narratival world the scriptures take place in.

First, Heaven and Earth are two poles: the two poles of the created order. Grammatically, the text is not saying that God merely created two spheres of existence. The two spheres are two opposite poles, and thus in the Hebrew language form a merism.[35] A merism is a way of stating two things and everything in-between them. In other words, when the bible refers to God creating the Heavens and the Earth, it is a way of saying the sum total of existence. This is the entirety of God' creation.[36]

Second, and incredibly important in understanding the narrative structure and world of the bible, Heaven and Earth are functionally different equal opposites. Heaven is not earth, and earth is not heaven, but they are meant to come together. They are like male and female, designed to be unified in marriage. This sets up a design template for the rest of the chapter. God creates in patterns of functionally different equal opposites. On day one of creation there are day and night. On day two, there are the waters above and the waters below. On day three there are land and sea. This pattern continues until it ultimately climaxes with the creation of the image bearers: man and woman. We will return to the creation of humanity later, but for now, suffice to

[35] Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses : Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy ; a New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and Notes*, *The Schocken Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 11.

[36] God of course continues to create, as in the new creation of a believer, but this is God's original act of creation. It is God creating the "stuff" that all other things can then be created by.

say man and woman end the pattern as the zenith of creation. Every time a new pair is introduced, it can clearly be seen that the pair is not at odds with one another. Each pair demonstrates differences, but the differences actually work together to form the complete unit. Heaven and Earth begin this pattern.

Flowing out of this is a crucial element that is missed time and time again. Often, people approach the narrative of scripture as if Hell is the functionally different equal opposite of Heaven. However, Hell is nowhere to be found. Hell, like sin is an intruder, a consequence of rebellion. The bible does not say, "In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Hell." God creates two functionally different equal opposites, and they are Heaven and Earth. They are forever designed to be in marital harmony. This is what the Garden is all about. The place where God dwells with man. This is why the end of the long narrative of scripture ends with, "Behold the dwelling place of God is now with man."[37] God's dwelling and human dwelling, are meant to overlap.[38]

If one sees Hell as the equal opposite of Heaven so much will go wrong; one's understanding of the original creation, one's understanding of death, and maybe most importantly, one's understanding of the character of God. Joshua Ryan Butler rightly points this out in arguing that our misunderstanding at this point creates an image of Hell as an underground torture chamber where God delights in inflicting pain upon his enemies.[39]

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[37] Rev 21:3

[38] N. T. Wright, *Simply Jesus : Who He Was, What He Did, Why It Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 132.

[39] Joshua Ryan Butler, *The Skeletons in God's Closet : The Mercy of Hell, the Surprise of Judgment, the Hope of Holy War* (Nashville, Tennessee: W Publishing Group, 2014).

How then is one to picture this overlap of Heaven and Earth? How would the dwelling place of humanity and God appear semiotically? If an ancient person conceived of a space where God's domain and man's domain overlapped what would it look like? What would be the image that would come to mind? Surprisingly, one should have the image of a mountain in their mind. Genesis does not state this clearly, but it does assume we know this, and other places in scripture tell us of this.

This semiotic meaning will rise to the surface when we allow the semiotic lens to meet the canonical and historical lenses. The prophets Ezekiel depicts Eden as a mountain in his lament to the Kings of Tyre. Ezekiel 28:13–15:

> You were in *Eden, the garden of God;*
> every precious stone was your covering,
> sardius, topaz, and diamond,
> beryl, onyx, and jasper,
> sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle;
> and crafted in gold were your settings
> and your engravings.
> On the day that you were created they were prepared.
> You were an anointed guardian cherub.
> I placed you; you were on the *holy mountain of God*;
> in the midst of the stones of fire you walked.
> You were blameless in your ways
> from the day you were created,
> till unrighteousness was found in you.

The lament is directed at the King of Tyre, but the King of Tyre is representative of someone else. This point is beyond the scope of this paper, but for our purposes, the King of Tyre is functioning semiotically in place of Satan. The lament is clearly addressed to an earthly ruler, but along the way one gets the feeling that a shift has occurred. The King of Tyre becomes an archetypical embodiment of Satan. Interpreters often force themselves to choose one or the other regarding interpretation. They insist he is either an earthy ruler, or Satan. This forces a

shallow reading of the poetry and is missing the beauty of the passage. The King of Tye is a Satan-like figure, and in describing him like Satan the author begins to talk about Satan directly. It does not have to be either-or; it can be a both-and.[40] Semiotics again, gives the interpreter a way out; a lens to see more clearly. The conclusion from the Ezekiel passage is that Satan was in the Garden, which is also the "mountain of God."

For the rest of scripture, a "mountain of God" is seen as a dwelling place of God. The temple, which sits atop Mt Zion, the holy Hill of Jerusalem, is called the "mountain of God." Mount Sinai where Moses spoke with God is a "mountain of God." Whenever we see the overlap of God's sphere and human's sphere, we are on a mountain. So how then, should we see the dwelling place of God in Genesis? The Garden is a Mountain Garden. God dwells with man on a mountain.

This is why there is an established pattern of how one can encounter God. It is on the top of His holy hills with the entrance facing the east. G.K. Beale notes, "Just as the entrance to Israel's later temple was to face east and be on Mount Zion (Exod 15:17), and just as the end-time temple of Ezekiel was to face east (Ezek 40:6) and be on a mountain (Ezek 40:2; 43:12), so the entrance to Eden faced east (Gen 3:24) and was situated on a mountain (Ezek 28:14, 16).[41]

This is where the semiotic lens can partner with the historical lens. Across the ancient world, people always saw the dwelling places of the gods as gardens. One can see how the logic of this works. Ancient life was rough. Water and food were not readily available. A paradise, therefore, would be filled with food, water, and vegetation. Since the gods were above and

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[40] In Tolkien's "The Two Towers" Gandalf addresses two figures while addressing one during the exorcism of King Theoden.

[41] Gregory K. Beale, "Eden, the Temple, and the Church's Mission in the New Creation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48.1 (2005): 8.

beyond, and they would obviously live in a garden paradise, the gods were seen as living on top of mountains in lush and fertile environments.

For example, in the Ugaritic Baal cycles, we are introduced to Baal, a god of agricultural fertility and lightening and rain. Michael Coogan and Mark Smith point out that, "one of the two large temples discovered at Ras Shamra is dedicated to him. Baal's home is on Mount Zaphon, a high peak north of Ugarit often visible from it."[42] This is further depicted in the Baal cycles where Baal says, "Come, and I will reveal it: in the midst of my mountain, divine Zaphon, in the sanctuary, in the mountain of my inheritance, in the pleasant place, in the hill of my victory."[43] The point being this, Baal is a god associated with rain, agriculture, and fertility, and lives atop of his divine mountain. The mountain is the sanctuary of the deity.

Additionally, from the Ugaritic text, the god El's dwelling place sounds strikingly familiar to the Edenic scene. The home of El, "the Creator of Creatures," is a mountain from whose base flow the two rivers that are the source of all fresh water in the world. There he lives in a tent, and there the sons of El, the divine Assembly over which he presides, meet.[44] Texts like these are easy to pass over, but we have to think semiotically. What image is being invoked. Where do rivers flow down from? They flow down from a mountain. El lives on top of a mountain that has rivers flowing down from it. This should immediately call to mind Gen 2:10-14:

> A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. 11 The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and

[42] Michael David Coogan and Mark S. Smith, *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 7.

[43] Ibid., 6.

[44] Ibid.

> onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

Why do the Scriptures bring so much attention to the rivers? Modern readers have often been fooled into thinking locations are secretly given so that some lucky explorer might find the actual location. This again misses the point. An image is being created, much like the parallel examples, the Garden is a mountain top garden paradise. And from this life, life flows down to the rest of creation.[45]

The image of the dwelling place of God is carried all through the scriptures and even on its final pages. In Revelation 21:9–11, John recalls:

> Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." 1And he carried me away in the Spirit to a *great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God,* having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

The text goes on to make the image as clear as possible:

> Then the angel showed me the *river of the water of life*, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, o*n either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month.* The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.[46]

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[45] A possible connection with a mountain and the primeval waters might exist. As water subsides the first land to appear would be the highest of mountains. In other words, the first inhabitable lands that appear after the chaos subsides is mountains. The ending of the Flood narrative might echo this sentiment. As the waters subside, Noah begins to plant a vineyard. He is given the command to be fruitful and multiply and thus a new mountain garden scene is created.

[46] Revelation 22:1–5

These images are trying to establish that at the conclusion of the story, it ends in a similar fashion as the beginning; thus, we are back at a point where humanity can once again say, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man."[47]

All of this to say, is that Heaven and Earth are two poles, but these two poles have the ability to touch. This overlap takes place in sacred space and the sacred space the ancient mind conceived of was one of a mountaintop paradise. This again brings us back to the main narratival point. Heaven and Earth are the functionally different equal opposites with the ability to touch and overlap. Hell is not in the equation. In the beginning God created two spheres of goodness. The Heavenly good, and the Earthy good. Both are paradises.[48]

This is no small claim. The first chapter of the Bible creates the narratival world the rest of scripture will take place in. It is absolutely crucial we get this right. In the beginning God created only goodness. The pattern of goodness will continue and is of utmost significance in understanding the type of God we are talking about. He is a good God that creates all things. His character is demonstrated in his actions.

Semiotically one is meant to picture God bringing creative energy to the tohu wa-bohu. Heaven and Earth are meant to exist in harmony, and what emerges at their point of overlap, is a mountaintop paradise; one in which man and God dwell together. This is all further established in Genesis Chapter 2, but the groundwork is all laid in the first chapter.

GOD

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[47] Revelation 21:3.

[48] This is not to make the mistake of saying that all of Earth was the same great place Eden was. In the creation account, nothing is made perfect, just good. And there are degrees of goodness. Eden was good, but it did not extend across the whole earth. The was the task of humanity. It is a grave error to postulate a static perfection concerning creation.

A note about "God" must be made at this point. Genesis 1 makes no attempt at theogony. It simply declares "God" to be. There is no origin story. There is no war in the heavens between other deities. This "image" of God is fundamentally different than all other ancient depictions of God. John Walton notes:

> "When the texts speak of theogony (origins of the gods) they include a number of elements in the presentation. In Egyptian literature it is most common to think of the earliest gods coming into being through bodily fluids (the creator god spitting, sneezing, sweating, or masturbating), while the later deities are simply born to a previous generation of deity. In the Memphite Theology the gods are brought into being by Atum separating them from himself. One way that creation was expressed was by "the mouth which pronounced the name of everything." Typically the first gods created are primordial cosmic gods. Since the forces of nature are expressions and manifestations of the attributes of deities, cosmogony and theogony become intertwined as the natural world comes into being along with the gods who embody the various elements of the cosmos.[49]

The God of the biblical creation account is fundamentally different. One is to "picture" something so utterly different than other gods of the ancient world that you would need a different type of category to fit Him in. He is not merely a powerful deity that sits atop the henotheistic hierarchy of being, He is the only being in such category. It is important to note that at this point, the identity of this "God" is still a mystery. The Hebrew word used to describe the character that is this "God" in Genesis 1 is Elohim. Not once, does the covenantal personal name of God, YHWH, appear. The tetragrammaton does not appear until we arrive at Chapter Two.

Elohim is not a name, it is a category of being. It refers to the type or nature of a being, but it is not a personal identifier. Additionally, it is an extremely flexible word in the Old Testament. When modern translators translate this word as "god" they are doing both a service and disservice to the modern reader. The service is that they clearly want the reader to identify the character mentioned, as the "God of Israel." This being, will later be identified as YHWH,

[49] Walton, 48.

but for now the story is a bit more mysterious. The disservice is that it begins to setup readers to think in categories that are foreign to the Bible. In the biblical world, and the cultures of the Ancient Near East for that matter, there are numerous elohim/gods. Elohim are spiritual beings. It is an ontological category. More importantly, the world of spiritual beings is a diverse one. There are good and bad ones, and different elohim have different functions and roles. There are also differences in power depending on the spiritual being. This will be discussed more when we address Genesis 1:27 and the so called "Majestic Plural." For now, however, suffice to say, Genesis 1 is doing something specific. It is introducing a category of being, namely a spiritual being, but the introduction of this spiritual being is unlike anything the ancient world had ever seen. This "elohim" is not like the other "elohim." He is fundamentally different. He alone is creator, he has no rivals, and there are no wars. There are no chaotic powers that can cause him harm. What "god" used to signify has been radically altered. For the author of Genesis, elohim no longer signifies "god," but now, "God." The sign used to point to the signified as a being among other beings in a similar ontological category. This new semiosis, however, now introduces a being unlike anything else.

To summarize, the opening words of Genesis present us with a *picture* of a single all powerful nameless deity with whom there are no rivals. He alone creates Heaven and Earth and everything in-between. He creates only goodness and begins the work of establishing a sacred space where He will dwell among the humans.

In Genesis 1:1, in one single verse we have more than enough to spend a lifetime studying and a lifetime wondering at. The beauty of the first verse shines brightly. C.S. Lewis, in his work on miracles reflects on it like this, "No philosophical theory which I have yet come

across is a radical improvement on the words of Genesis, that "in the beginning God made Heaven and Earth."[50]

DAY AND NIGHT AS SEMIOTIC REALITIES

Light and Darkness continue the pattern of functionally different equal opposites. They are distinct objects, but together they form a day. A day occurs when the functionally different equal opposites are established and work together and exist in harmony. It is important to note, that the creation of the sun and moon does not occur until day four. Day one is not talking about luminary bodies such as sun, moon, and stars, this is something altogether different. Additionally, God creates the light, but he does not specifically create the darkness. He, rather, separates the darkness from the light. The semiotics of light and darkness may be the clearest as they are actually explicitly pointed out in the text. Genesis 1:5, "God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." Light points to "day" and darkness points to "night."

The distinction that God did not create darkness, but separated it from the day was something highlighted by the early church fathers:

> And God divided the light and the darkness, and God called the light day and he called the darkness night." It did not say here "God made the darkness," because darkness is merely the absence of light. Yet God made a division between light and darkness. So too we make a sound by crying out, and we make a silence by not making a sound, because silence is the cessation of sound. Still in some sense we distinguish between sound and silence and call the one sound and the other silence.… "He called the light day, and he called the darkness night" was said in the sense that he made them to be called, because he separated and ordered all things so that they could be distinguished and receive names.[51]

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[50] C. S. Lewis, Wayne Martindale, and Jerry Root, *The Quotable Lewis* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), 33.

[51] Augustine of Hippo. On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees; And, on the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book. Edited by Thomas P. Halton.

Ambrose continues in a similar view saying, "God is the author of light, and the place and cause of darkness is the world. But the good Author uttered the word light so that he might reveal the world by infusing brightness therein and thus make its aspect beautiful. Suddenly then, the air became bright, and darkness shrank in terror from the brilliance of the novel brightness.[52]

Remember, darkness was already over the "face of the deep." God is seen at this point as introducing the light and dividing darkness from it. It is only when the darkness and light are established as signs for day and night, that the first day is able to be righty ordered. It may seem obvious at this point, and little contention is made, but already in the first verses of scripture we see objects standing in place of greater realities. The author explicitly creates an instance of semiosis and makes it clear to the reader. This semiotic precedence is important as we move forward through the creation account.

EARTH AND SKY AS SEMIOTIC REALITIES

For the Ancient Near Eastern mind, the elements of creation were signs pointing to greater realities. The sky is not just a sky, there is a power behind it. The sky is not merely a "thing" in the created order. The "thing" functions as a placeholder for a certain type of power. James P Allen speaking in particular of Egypt states, "the Egyptians lived in a universe composed not of things, but of beings. Each element is not merely a physical component, but a distinct individual with a unique personality and will. The sky is not an inanimate vault, but a goddess who conceives the sun each night and gives birth to him in the morning. The atmosphere

[52] Andrew Louth and Marco Conti, eds., Genesis 1–11, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 7.

that separates sky from earth is not an empty void, but a god. The Duat is not merely a mysterious region through which the sun passes at night, but the god Osiris."[53]

So, in Genesis 1, there is a polemic at play. Genesis is *re-signifying* the components of the ancient order. If the sky used to point to a specific deity, that sign is now pointing in a different direction. It is important to pause here and address the polemic involved in Genesis 1, as this phenomenon is not isolated to this day of creation, but is actually something at work throughout.

Many have rightly pointed out that the Genesis 1 account is removing many of the elements that pagan creation accounts incorporated. Bruce Waltke states, "Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the biblical authors stripped the ancient pagan literatures of their mythological elements, infused them with the sublimities of their God, and refuted the pagan myths by identifying the holy Lord as the true Creator and Ruler of the cosmos and of history. Israel's God stands apart from his creation, transcends matter, lacks sexuality, engages in no combat with other gods, for there are none, and establishes humane laws."[54] However, is there more at work than a mere removal of certain elements? John Currid righty expresses a concern that this understanding undervalues and undercuts the originality of the exceptional nature of the creation account found in Genesis.[55] For Currid, much more is at work. Genesis 1 is including polemical elements not to merely remove pagan elements, but to creatively and wonderfully set the God of Israel apart.

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[53] James P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt : The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts*, *Yale Egyptological Studies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Egyptological Seminar, Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Graduate School, Yale University, 1988), 8.

[54] Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology : An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 200.

[55] John D. Currid, *Against the Gods : The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2013), 35.

This is seen in new semiosis. What something formerly pointed to, is now re-signified. Currid goes on:

> First, in regard to the very nature of the creator, all societies of the ancient Near East, save the Hebrews, were polytheists. The gods themselves were immanent, that is, personified in various powers and elements of the universe. These gods were not omnipotent but were restricted in power to the capacity of the natural elements they personified. In addition, the temperament of the gods often reflected human nature—so that the deities frequently acted in a depraved, perverted manner. To the contrary, the God of the Hebrews is presented as transcendent, that is, set apart from the cosmos. He works within the universe, but he is not part of it. The universe is God's creation, but it is not God. The God of Israel, moreover, does not act humanly by reflecting the flaws of human nature.[56]

What Currid is pointing to, is something semiotics can help articulate more clearly. The elements of creation always pointed to deities, gods, and spiritual beings. There were powers behind the physical elements. Genesis is taking an eraser and removing what they once pointed to, and points them somewhere else, namely the majesty of God's creative power.

For examples in Egypt, the sky was a vault that was supported by the deity Nut. In the Heliopolitan theology, Nut was the mistress of the heavenly bodies which were said to be all her children who entered her mouth and emerged from her womb.[57] The idea is that the deity swallows up the sun, moon, and stars and then as the day continues rebirths them. This rhythm is what establishes a day. There is so much more story in the mythology that fills in the back story to a deity like this, but suffice to say, for the Egyptians and much of the ancient world, the sky was not simply "sky" in a materialist sense. It is that, but so much more. This is incredibly difficult for the modern mind to grasp, but it was not only believed, but a fundamental assumption on how the universe operated for the ancient mind.

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[56] Ibid., 40.

[57] Charles Russell Coulter and Patricia Turner, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Deities* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), 353.

Genesis is not simply "demythologizing" an ancient story from its pagan foundations, it is reworking the signs and signifiers. In other words, it is deconstructing the very way humans believed the world to operate. It is not simply introducing you to a new deity named YHWH, Genesis is deconstructing the inner mechanics of how the universe was thought to operate, and in doing so, it is giving the ancient world, and humanity for that matter, an entirely new operating system. This is the polemical nature of Genesis 1. An ancient reader would not just be confronted with a new deity, but they would be confronted with a whole new reality.

It is important to note that polemics can be overstated. The intent is not deconstruction in every corner, but along the way both deconstruction and reconstruction. This is reminiscent of imperial cult studies in the New Testament. Although the New Testament certainly has a critique of the state that uses power in an unlawful way, there has certainly been overreaching in interpreters seeing, "Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not" on every page of the New Testament. The New Testament certainly used polemics, but the documents were not primarily constructed to assault the "empire." Likewise, polemics are in Genesis, but once noticed, there is an unhealthy temptation to see them everywhere. Again, the author's main point is not polemical, but polemics are sprinkled in when necessary.

What is taking place with the sky, is also seen with the creation of the earth. For the Egyptians, the earth was the domain of Geb. Geb was the brother and spouse of the Nut. They together birthed additional gods.[58] However, Genesis 1:9–10 reads, "And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good." There is no power behind the earth. The waters are simply

[58] Ibid., 189.

gathered together, and the dry land appears. Again, no deity is working behind the scenes. God looks at the pair of functional different equal opposite, land and sea, and declares them good.

The pattern of God declaring good should be noted here. It is a pattern that will continue and ultimately climax with the creation of image bearers. God is creating a world that is not only habitable, but good. The building blocks for humanity to flourish are already being established. The God in this creation account is, so far, consistently good.

TREES AND PLANTS AS SEMIOTIC REALITIES

One of the most interesting occurrences of semiosis takes place on the third day of creation. I have saved this discussion up to this point. It is, however, something that can be observed on any of the days of creation. This decision was based on the fact that in particular with the creation of trees on day three, something more significant takes place. The insights that semiotics delivers here cannot be overstated. It is something incredibly important for the rest of scripture, but unfortunately, is something that is easily missed. It is when the lens of semiotics is used, that the additional meaning is more easily seen.

First, we must look at a pattern that is established in the creation week. On days one, two, and three God is seen as preparing an environment for later occupants to dwell in on days four, five, and six. Oftentimes, the reader focuses on the fact that the first five days of creation are days in which God is preparing an environment for humans to live in. Although that may be true, there is more at work. Day one prepares an environment for day four occupants to live in. Day two prepares an environment for day five occupants to live in. Lastly, day three prepares an environment for day six occupants to dwell in.

For example, on day one God does not create the sun and the moon. He creates light and separates it from the darkness. The environment of day and night are established so that the

luminary bodies can become their citizens on day four. On day one, Genesis 1:3–5 reads, “And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.” Then, subsequent to this on day four verses 15–18 reads, “and God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness.”

This pattern is continued with day two and day five. On day two we read, “And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse.” On day two God prepares an environment by separating the water below from the waters above. This provides an ideal environment for the inhabitants of day five to live in. Genesis 1:20–21 reads, “and God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind.” New environments are introduced with the intent that the latter half of the week would fill them with occupants.

Semiotically, the first three days also point to three important realities: time, weather, and food. Day one establishes time, day two establishes weather, and day three establishes food. Think how each of these elements have significant symbolic value to the ancient person. What could be more important for an ancient agrarian culture? If one was going to survive, time,

weather, and food were of utmost importance. In commenting on this feature John Walton observes that time, weather, and food are also essential in other creation accounts.[59] Walton highlights three key lines at the beginning of Papyrus Insinger:

> He created day, month, and year
> through the commands of the lord of command.
> He created summer and winter through
> the rising and setting of Sothis.
> He created food before those who are alive,
> the wonder of the fields.[60]

Each of the first three days create an image of a system at work. These three systems of time, weather, and food were essential to the ancient person. The biblical account, much like other creation accounts holds this as important.

There is, however, something unique that takes place on day three. There is a sort of bonus feature that is mentioned on this day, and this bonus feature is also replicated on day six. On day three we see the separation from land and sea. Genesis 1:9–10 states, "And God said, 'Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas.'" The dry land appears on day three so that the life created on day six can have a place to dwell. Genesis 1:24–25 reads, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds." And it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind."

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[59] Walton, 58.

[60] Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The Late Period* 2006 ed., vol. 3 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 210.

The first half of the creation week is focused on creating the space for later inhabitants to occupy. Sun, moon, and stars are the citizens of day one. Birds and fish are the citizens of day two. And lastly, the animals are the citizens of the dry land on day six. In the midst of this however, something significant is taking place on days three and six.

In addition to the environment created on day three, there is the introduction of plants and trees. Genesis 1:11–12, reads "And God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.' And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind." This is sort of bonus creation for day three. Something similarly occurs on day six, in addition to the animals, God has something else to introduce as a sort of bonus. Genesis 1:26 records God saying, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Additionally, they are then given the command to be fruitful and multiply. Day three and six both have a bonus piece of creation and the reader should see the symmetry between the two days.

It is here that the author is doing something significant, and very much intentionally. Something easily missed by a modern interpreter but would have been caught by the ancient reader. When the historical task and the semiotic task work hand in hand, this can be seen. At first it may sound a bit bizarre, but the semiosis taking place on day three and day six is saying that "trees" signify "humans."

We have already established the symmetry between days three and six, but there are additional intentional parallels being communicated. The trees that are created are "fruit trees" that ought to "bear fruit" and they do so by the spreading of their "seed." Trees are to be fruitful trees and humans ought to be fruitful humans. Both are to do so by their seed. What makes this

case stronger is that the Hebrew words that are applied to both trees and humans are the same root words. Both trees and humans are to פרה/parah "bear fruit," and trees and humans both have a זֶרַע/zera, a "seed" to do so. This is establishing the importance of both humans and trees in the biblical narrative. When trees appear in biblical narrative, one better pay attention, it is no accident. Tim Mackie of the Bible Project rightfully points out, "the design structure of Genesis 1 wants me to associate fruitful trees and fruitful humans as they both exist on the dry land and they both have a parallel function described with the same vocabulary."[61] Once this connection is made, and if it is intentional, the interpreter should see more examples of humans functioning like trees, and trees functioning like humans; and this is indeed the case.

Trees, like humans, are self-perpetuating. They have a way to keep on living through their seed. Modern readers may miss the connection here because in the modern Western context the individual is exalted. The modern Western person is raised in a hyper individualistic culture. When they think about eternal life, they first and foremost think about themselves as the individual. Many other cultures, and certainly many ancient cultures often thought about it through the lens of community. So, one may live in and on through their descendants, or in their "seed." The life of the family, tribe, or people goes on, and in that sense the individual may go on as well.[62] This is no small matter. On day three, trees are given the ability to pass on their life, and pass it on indefinitely through their seed. Reflecting on this, one can begin to see the conceptual framework that eternal life is built upon. When an ancient person reflects on trees,

[61] The Bible Project, "Humans Are Trees," accessed 2/5/2021. https://bibleproject.com/podcast/humans-are-trees/.

[62] At least in modern American culture, this idea can be seen in family trees. There is one tree, but filled with many names and descendants.

they might begin to see a symbol of life everlasting. This turns out to be exactly the case; not only in the next chapter of Genesis, but in the imagery of the ancient world.

Other cultures not only had connections between eternal life and tress, but also humans as trees. The major difference is that for other cultures and peoples, the connection was not just from a tree to any human being, the tree and its life were connected to the king. This will be discussed at length when looking at the semiotics of day six, but suffice to say for now, Genesis democratizes the image of God, while ancient cultures usually apply it to kings. Important for the discussion at hand, the human who is to have dominion is associated with trees and life. We see this in Egypt in the 13th century BC depicted in the Apotheosis of Rameses II. He is seated on his throne while three gods (Amen-Ra-Tum, Safekh, and Tahut) inscribe his name on the fruits of a Tree of Life.[63] In the Gilgamesh Epic, there is a plant called "old man becomes young" that grows at the bottom of the cosmic river.[64] In the 860's BC, engraved in Gypsum by the Neo-Assyrian culture there is a picture of the King alongside a tree of life.[65]

What is important to note with all of this is that trees, life, and humans, are all being knit together. As Tim Mackie notes, "people are like trees, which means the future of humans, their origins and their destiny, are going to be linked in some way. Humans are trees. The origins of

[63] Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Tree of Life," Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 2104.

[64] Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ge 2:9.

[65] Joy of Museums Virtual Tours, "Tree of Life - Assyrian," accessed 1/3/2021. https://joyofmuseums.com/most-popular/tour-of-mesopotamian-art/tree-of-life/.

trees are similar to humans."[66] Mackie then asks the question, "I wonder if the future of humans will be bound up with the future of trees?"[67] The answer to the question, is an answer that helps test one's point in the overall thesis. If semiotics is at work in the biblical text, then one ought to expect later biblical authors to use objects established in Genesis in a similar way. Genesis, again, should function as a sort of semiotic dictionary for the rest of scripture. The symbolic connection between humans, trees, and their ultimate destiny, should play out in the rest of bible, and this absolutely is the case. However, it is easily missed.

In English, we have many different words available when we talk about things that pertain to trees. We have the word "tree" but also words that can bring further specificity to parts of the tree. We used words like trunk, sticks, and log. Furthermore, we have words to describe parts of the tree when cut and used for some function like wood, timber, lumber. However, in Hebrew, the one word עֵץ/ets is used for all of these words and is incredibly flexible. It can be translated as tree, wood, stick, timber, shaft, gallows, and in additional ways. English might make these distinctions, but in the conceptual Hebrew world, all you have is "trees." There is no firewood, no timber, no sticks; just trees.

In the Garden there are two important trees. The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In Genesis 6:14 God tells Noah, "Make yourself an ark of gopher *wood/trees*." Thus, the ark becomes a vehicle of salvation. In the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, the text reads, "And Abraham took the *wood/trees* of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together.[68] When the people of

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[66] The Bible Projet, "Trees of the Ancients," accessed 1/20/2021. https://bibleproject.com/podcast/trees-ancients.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Gen 22:6

Israel are going to die for lack of clean drinking water, Exodus 15:25 records, “the Lord showed Moses a *log/tree*, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. The Ark in the Holy of Holies is made of wood/trees. In Deuteronomy 21:23 a man is cursed if he hangs on a tree. In all of these examples, English translations will try and bring specificity to exactly what is being discussed, but in Hebrew, all you have is the general term עֵץ/ets. When this is known, it becomes apparent that trees are constantly and continually playing a significant role in key moments in the biblical narrative.

There is something about humanity and trees that are intricately linked together in the biblical stories. All of this continues to play out in the scripture and leads ultimately to the climax of the entire Christian tradition: Jesus hanging on a tree. It is however, by Jesus hanging on a tree that the man is producing much fruit. In hanging on a tree, the cursed instrument and symbol of suffering is transformed to an image of life. Jesus goes into the ground, a seed falling from a tree, and becomes the first-fruits of the new creation. It is no coincidence that after Jesus is removed from the cross he is placed in a garden. The “seed” must go into the earth in order to rise in new life. John 19:41 reads, “Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.” The biblical authors draw attention to the fact that this is taking place in a garden. That should create a link in the readers mind to the first garden.

Finally, in Revelation, the tree of life is seen bringing healing and life to the nations. Revelation 22:1–2 reads, “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”

From beginning to end, humans and trees are tied together, and all of this is set in motion on day three of the creation story. This connection is established early, and the biblical authors will employ it throughout the scriptures. Semiotics allows the reader to see something that will produce significant dividends throughout the bible. Trees point to humans and the life they were created to have. The image of a tree pops up at significant turning points in scripture. The "roots" for all of this first find their fertile ground in the opening chapter of Genesis.[69]

At this point an important observation must be stated, because it is the same observation that will arise again and again when semiotics is used in interpretation. When one allows the text to ask and answer the questions it wants to, and one avoids forcing the text to answer questions that it is not concerned with, so much more meaning is allowed to rise to the surface. This is incredibly evident with plants and trees and their creation on day three. The modern mind immediately wants to ask questions that it is cultural conditioned to ask. How can earth sprout forth vegetation and trees on day three, when the sun and moon are not created until day four? What about photosynthesis? What about the chlorophyl that plants need to survive? How do seeds begin to germinate? These types of questions can be applied to nearly any day in the creation week. They, however, are all missing the point; and worse that missing the point they are failing to see the richness of the biblical text.

While an interpreter may be wondering about how trees function biologically without a sun, they fail to consider how trees are functioning literarily and semiotically. Not only do they miss out on some of the meaning of that particular biblical text, they also miss a connection and

[69] For the best discussion on this see The Bible Project Podcast Series "Tree of Life." https://bibleproject.com/podcast/humans-are-trees

theme that will play on repeat throughout the scriptures. In other words, in getting Genesis wrong, one can get a whole lot more wrong than just the creation account.

THE RISE OF LAND AS SEMIOTIC REALITY

Before leaving day three behind, there is one other significant semiotic movement taking place. On day three, the earth rises from the sea. In this, there is an image of life rising from the waters of chaos, and thus also a symbol of Christ rising from the dead. At first glance, that conclusion may seem like a stretch. However, upon further examination of the text and how the pattern of "third day rising" is used in Genesis, it does not seem so far a stretch. Again, one must use the lens of semiotics, and look at the rising as an image, in order to see the same image when it reappears later in the text.

In Genesis 22 Abraham is tested by God. God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah. Genesis 22:3–5 records:

> "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the *third day* Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. 5 Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you."

The question is: will the story end with death, or life. The famous biblical story ends with Isaac rising from the alter on the third day. This is also syncing up with the previously established theme of trees. On the third day of creation, the trees are linked with humanity. Now, on the third day, you have the boy rising from the wood/trees that he carried on his back to a place of execution, and finding not death, but life.

In Exodus, we encounter again a "third day" dealing with life and death. Exodus 19:10–13 reads:

> the Lord said to Moses: "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the *third day*. For on the *third day* the Lord

> will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain *shall be put to death*. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live."

Once again, there is a test of life and death on the third day. The echoes of Genesis chapter two should be heard loud and clear. In Genesis, you have the command, "do not eat or you shall surely die," and in Exodus you have "do not touch or you shall die." But what happens on the third day? Not death, but a covenant and the birth of a new people.

The prophet Hosea sees this same theme and employs it in a similar fashion. Hosea 6:1-2 reads, "Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

Likewise in the book of Jonah, we see the same pattern. Jonah is swallowed up and taken into the sea. Certain death awaits him, but he offers up a prayer and God delivers him. The text says that Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights until, "the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land."[70] Notice the wording: "the dry land." This is the same Hebrew word found in Genesis for dry land: יַבָּשָׁה. After Jonah is placed on the dry land, the Lord immediately commanded Jonah to "arise."[71]

Ultimately, the climax of this pattern is found in the words and experience of Jesus. First in his words when he was asked for a sign by the Pharisees. Jesus responds by saying, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so

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[70] Jonah 2:10

[71] Jonah 3:1

will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."[72] These words then turn to experience and Jesus goes under the earth, but on the third day rises up. The new human and the new life sprout up.

This is how the semiotics work. The biblical author makes this explicitly clear by saying the "sign" of Jonah. This is why, what might seem like a stretch at first, is actually thematically connected through semiotics. All of this is set in motion by the pattern of creation established on day three. Out of the waters comes life. Many of the first Christians read day three of the creation week in this manner. You can see a connection of water and death in New Testament baptismal language as well.

Colossians 2:11–12 reads, "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead." When ones goes into the water they are being "buried." The water is now functioning semiotically as a burial. In the book of Romans, the same connections are made: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."[73] It is the very first page of the Bible that these images are first given and the groundwork for these connections are made.

This also solves a problem that has plagued interpreters. In 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 Paul states, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our

[72] Matthew 12:39–40

[73] Romans 6:3–4

sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was *raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,* and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. The problem encountered, is the text says that Christ rose on the third day according to the scriptures and nowhere in the Old Testaments text do we find any reference to this. Interpreters look in vain trying to find this reference. Adding to the problem, Jesus himself makes the same claim saying, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead."[74] Critics would claim that these verses are disingenuous attempts made by the first Christians to make it appear as if the death and resurrection of Jesus was prophesied in the Old Testament. What critics and many of the faithful miss, is that one does not need a specific scriptural reference. The entire Old Testament is preparing an image, and that image begins to function as a motif. This "third day rising" motif finds its source in Genesis 1. From the waters rise dry land; from death, new life begins.

This motif is a powerful image that the biblical authors pick up and utilize time and time again, so that by the time you get to the New Testament, the image is firmly established. In light of this, Paul can say without hesitation that Christ was buried and rose on the third day according to the scriptures. Too often, interpreters are looking for a specific *text*, when they should be looking for a specific *image*.

SUN AND MOON AS SEMIOTIC REALITIES

Another remarkable example of semiotics at work is found in the previously mentioned luminary bodies in Genesis 1:16. The text reads, "And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars." It is important to note that the Hebrew language has a word for sun and moon, but in Genesis 1 the sun and moon

[74] Luke 24:46

are merely referred to as "the greater and lesser light." There is a significant reason behind this, and it is when one begins to look at the "lights" in the sky semiotically that new meaning will appear.

The Hebrew words for sun and moon are near identical to the words West Semites used to refer to their sun and moon gods. The Canaanites are the next-door neighbors of the Hebrew people in the Ancient Near East, and like those of the surrounding cultures, believed in multiple gods.[75] The name of the sun god worshipped at Ugarit was Shamesh, and the name of their moon god was Yerach.[76] The similar Hebrew words are שֶׁמֶשׁ/shemesh for the sun, and יָרֵחַ/yareah for the moon. The words are clearly related, so much so that they even sound identical. It is as if the author of Genesis is refusing to allow even the slightest acknowledgment of the surrounding gods to creep into the origin story. For the people of the Ancient Near East, the sun and the moon were more than just sources of light. They were signs, and in a very literal way stood in for the cosmic realities behind them. Much like our discussion of Nut and the Sky in Egyptian thought, the moon is not just a moon, the moon is a deity, and what you name the moon is often times the name of the deity. The author of Genesis appears to be doing something quite intentional here. What may stand in place for a deity in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, is now a mere part of the created order, and completely obedient to YWHW's rule. In other words, the signs and symbols that functioned as representatives of deities have been stripped of power and personality and given creature-like function and order.

[75] Currid, 40.

[76] K. A. Mathews, *Genesis*, 2 vols., *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 154.

Many of the early church fathers looked at the creation of the sun and moon in a similar fashion. They saw the creation story establishing monotheism. This understanding is often times completely foreign to the modern person. The modern reader may ask questions of chronology and history; so they might wonder how there were plants before there was a sun to feed them? In that case, chronology is that which is most important. However, for many of the church fathers, what was chronologically first, was not as important as what was metaphysically first.

For example, Ambrose of Milan, the teacher and baptizer of Augustine said, "Let everyone be informed that the sun is not the author of vegetation.… How can the sun give the faculty of life to growing plants when these have already been brought forth by the life-giving creative power of God before the sun entered into such a life as this? The sun is younger than the green shoot, younger than the green plant."[77] For Ambrose, it was important that plants came first. The sun needed to have every opportunity for people to ascribe deity to it removed. The modern Western tradition has two thousand years of Judeo-Christian tradition to expel polytheism, so this does not immediately stand out in the text to the modern reader. In today's context most people are theist, atheist, or agnostic; they do not wrestle with the same concerns as the first readers. They also are not looking at the text in the same manner as the first Christians.

Chrysostom, in his homilies on Genesis makes similar conclusions. In a world filled with paganism, the sun takes a different role in the mind of the ancient reader. Chrysostom writes:

> Pagan peoples, however, in their wonder and stupor at this heavenly body were unable to look beyond it to praise its creator; instead, they sang its praises and treated it as a deity. Hence the reason for the blessed Paul's saying, "They worshipped and served the creature instead of its creator." What could be more stupid than people failing to recognize the creator from the creature and being caught up in such error as to put creature and artefact on the same level as their creator? So then, foreseeing the inclination of slothful people to

[77] Andrew Louth and Marco Conti, *Genesis 1-11*, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 15.

> error, Sacred Scripture teaches us that the creation of this heavenly body took place three days later, after the growth of all the plants from the earth, after the earth's taking its own form, so that afterwards no one could say that without this force these things would not have been brought forth from the earth. Hence it shows you everything completed before the creation of this body lest you attribute the production of the crops to it instead of to the Creator of all things.[78]

Likewise, Basil in the Hexaemeron writes:

> Some consider the sun as the source of all productiveness on the earth. It is, they say, the action of the sun's heat which attracts the vital force from the centre of the earth to the surface. The reason why the adornment of the earth was before the sun is the following; that those who worship the sun, as the source of life, may renounce their error. If they be well persuaded that the earth was adorned before the genesis of the sun, they will retract their unbounded admiration for it, because they see grass and plants vegetate before it rose.[79]

Again, for many of the church fathers, metaphysical preeminence was the issue at hand. The first readers of Genesis were surrounded by people who worshiped the sun. Generations later, the church fathers were surrounded by people who likewise worshiped the sun. Although sun worship was not cultically central at many points in the days of the Roman Empire, there are times when it was dominate. For example, the Roman Emperor Aurelian made it the official religion of Rome and coins were made to spread the word.[80] The idea of the "Unconquered Son" was something that many Christians would have been familiar with. It is here, that the first

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[78] John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 1–17, ed. Thomas P. Halton, trans. Robert C. Hill, vol. 74, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 83–84.

[79] Basil of Caesarea, "The Hexaemeron," in St. Basil: Letters and Select Works, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Blomfield Jackson, vol. 8, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1895), 76.

[80] "The Sign Language of Roman Coins," Forum Ancient Coins, accessed 4/17/2021. https://www.forumancientcoins.com/moonmoth/reverse_sol.html.

Christians would have a similar desire to the author of Genesis in desiring to demonstrate the sun as a mere part of the created order.

This same maneuver is made with the other lights found in Genesis. The full sentence of Genesis 1:16 reads, "And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—*and the stars*." The phrase "and the stars" is almost casually inserted as if it is not that big of deal in the author's mind. This, however, is incredibly significant in the world of the bible.

The stars, like the sun and moon, were signs beyond themselves. The stars were to be read and controlled in some sense, human destiny.[81] The creation of stars is given much more space in other creation accounts and the silence here is telling.[82] In Genesis, the stars get a total three words: "and the stars." Sun, moon, and star in Genesis have no personality, and are in complete creaturely submission to YHWH. This is easily missed by the modern person as few look to the stars in this matter, but for Augustine this was clear.

> Everyone understands that there is a great difference between astrological prediction and observing the stars as natural phenomena, in the way that farmers and sailors do, either to verify geographical areas or to steer their course somewhere, as pilots of ships do, and travelers, making their way through the sandy wastes of the south with no sure path; or to explain some point of doctrine by mentioning some of the stars as a useful illustration. As I said, there is a great difference between these practical customs and the superstitions of men who study the stars not to forecast the weather or to find their way or for spiritual parables but in an effort to peer into the predestined outcome of events.[83]

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[81] Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. v. 1, *Genesis 1-15* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014), 21.

[82] Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis = Be-Reshit : The Traditional Hebrew Text with New Jps Translation*, 1st ed., *The Jps Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 10.

[83] Louth and Conti, 18-19.

Once again, it appears that the author is intentionally crafting the creation account to make monotheism explicitly clear. In other words, the author is not merely giving the audience a historical retelling of the chronology and events of creation, but the author wants to establish a doctrine with his story.

In this section, even the word "signs" appears to have been stripped of supernatural meaning. John Walton explains:

> In a prologue to a Sumerian astrological treatise, the major gods, An, Enlil and Enki, put the moon and stars in place to regulate days, months and omens. In the famous Babylonian Hymn to Shamash, the sun god, reference is also made to his role in regulating the seasons and the calendar in general. It is intriguing that he is also the patron of divination. The Hebrew word used for "sign" has a cognate in Akkadian that is used for omens. The Hebrew word, however, has a more neutral sense, and again the author has emptied the elements of the cosmos of their more personal traits.[84]

In retelling the story of the creation of solar bodies, the author of Genesis is paying very close attention to the way in which he speaks of such things. Each word and phrase are being crafted in such a manner to point the reader to a radical and new concept for the time; namely, there is one God and this God alone is creator. While other creation accounts have the gods, goddesses, demons, and supernatural beings at war and conflict with each other, Genesis is doing something remarkably different.

Once again, we see the same themes and points being highlighted. The deity revealed in the Genesis account is the only deity at work. Monotheism is clearly rising to the top as a primary theme of the account. While monotheism might not sound like a spectacular reading to the modern person, one must not overlook the fact that the modern world has had a few thousand years of the Judeo-Christian belief structure cultivating this idea. In its day, it would have been

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[84] Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ge 1:14.

radical. Modern readers can easily get distracted and immediately want to start asking questions about what Genesis considers secondary at best. However, it is becoming clear that monotheism is primary. Additionally, this God again is not only depicted as the only God, but he is being depicted as a God concerned with goodness. Moving forward, this will remain an important question: will the two themes of monotheism and goodness continue to play out?

SEA MONSTERS AS SEMIOTIC REALITIES

On the fifth day of creation, we see yet again, semiotics pointing to monotheism and the goodness of God. It does so, however, in an unexpected and surprising way. It is when the lens of semiotics is applied that it becomes clear. In Genesis 1:21 it says, "So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good." Attention must be given to the word "sea creature." The Hebrew word used here is תַּנִּין/tanninim, and is translated as "sea creature" in many modern translations.[85] For example, the New International Version reads, So God created the *great creatures* of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good." Likewise, the English Standard Version reads, "So God created the great *sea creatures* and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. The King James Version is slightly different but still is attempting to make the point. It reads, "And God created *great whales*, and every living

[85] Nearly all modern translations do not translate the word as monsters. This includes The New International Version, The English Standard Version, and The New Living translation. Only the New American Standard Bible translates the word as monster.

creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind. And God saw that it was good."

So, what are we dealing with when we encounter the word תַּנִּין/tanninim? Is the biblical author referencing great sea creatures, whales, or large fish? When asking these questions, it is essential to remember that we are reading an ancient document written by ancient people. Once one realizes this, it is easily decided that the best translation of this word is not sea creature, but rather, *sea monster.*

In the fourteen occurrences of this Hebrew word, the English Standard Version only twice translates the word as creature. In all other occurrences the word is translated as "monster," "dragon," or "serpent." This indicates that "monster" might be a likely candidate as far as translation is concerned. However, this inconsistency also indicates that there might be some hesitation on the translator's part.

The next question that should be asked is: "what type of monster" would the conceptual world of the Ancient Near Eastern person visualize? The answer, surprisingly, is a great and terrible sea serpent like dragon. The evidence for this conclusion is confirmed elsewhere in scripture. For example, Isaiah 27:1 reads, "In that day the Lord with his hard and great and strong sword will punish *Leviathan* the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting *serpent*, and he will slay the *dragon* that is in the sea."

Here we see three key words being used interchangeably to describe the beast. When we look at all three words, the image of exactly what we are taking about begins to emerge. The first word is Leviathan, the second is serpent, and the third dragon. The first word is Leviathan, and the Hebrew word is לִוְיָתָן. In the biblical world and the cultures that surrounded it, the Leviathan was a mythological sea serpent or dragon which often became a personification of the "chaos

waters."[86] It is mentioned in the Ugaritic texts, as well as Jewish literature, and etymologically the name means "twisting one," as pertaining to a serpent.[87] The second word is serpent, and the Hebrew word is נָחָשׁ. This is the usual word in the Old Testament used to refer to a common snake.[88] The third is dragon, and the Hebrew is תַּנִּין/tannin. This word for dragon is the same word we find in Genesis 1:26 and is the one so many translations translate as sea creature. But what does Isaiah 27 depict? What image is it painting in the mind of its readers. The ancient audience knew the image. It is a giant serpent-like sea creature that, for all intents and purposes, is a monster or dragon.

Ezekiel 29:3 paints the same picture when it records, "Speak, and say, thus says the Lord God: "Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great *dragon* that lies in the midst of his streams." Jeremiah 51:34 likewise reads, "Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has devoured me; he has crushed me; he has made me an empty vessel; he has swallowed me like a *monster*; he has filled his stomach with my delicacies; he has rinsed me out. Translators consistently know how to treat the word *tannin* except in context to creation. As previously stated, the ESV only translates this word twice as sea creature in its fourteen occurrences. In both of these two occasions, the context is creation. The other text in which this word appears is Psalm 148:7 which reads, "Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps."

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[86] John Day, "Leviathan," ed. David Noel Freedman, The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 295.

[87] Ibid

[88] The word appears 31 times in the Old Testament and is translated "snake" in every occurrence in the ESV.

The context for Psalm 148 is clearly creation. Many of the elements of Genesis 1 are repeated, but this time in poetic fashion.

> Praise the Lord!
> Praise the Lord from the heavens;
> praise him in the heights!
> Praise him, all his angels;
> praise him, all his hosts!
> Praise him, sun and moon,
> praise him, all you shining stars!
> Praise him, you highest heavens,
> and you waters above the heavens!
> Let them praise the name of the Lord!
> For he commanded and they were created.
> And he established them forever and ever;
> he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away.
> Praise the Lord from the earth,
> you great sea creatures and all deeps,
> fire and hail, snow and mist,
> stormy wind fulfilling his word!
> Mountains and all hills,
> fruit trees and all cedars!
> Beasts and all livestock,
> creeping things and flying birds!
> Kings of the earth and all peoples,
> princes and all rulers of the earth!
> Young men and maidens together,
> old men and children!
> Let them praise the name of the Lord,
> for his name alone is exalted;
> his majesty is above earth and heaven.
> He has raised up a horn for his people,
> praise for all his saints,
> for the people of Israel who are near to him.
> Praise the Lord!

The only two times in the ESV when the word *tannin* is translated as "creature" is found in Genesis 1 and a clear retelling of Genesis 1 found in Psalm 148. The important question is, what might be the motivation behind this?

One can understand why the modern translators would translate the word in this manner; clearly God is creating some sort of sea creature. The issue is that by removing the "monster"

element, the translation robs the word of its semiotic significance. There is a massive difference in picturing a sea creature compared to picturing a sea monster. Additionally, there might be a concern that translating the word appropriately might trigger an unnecessary response from the modern reader. One can see that many Christians using traditional interpretive methods might even start to panic at such a translation. Some readers might conclude that since we now know through modern science and technology that there is no such thing as sea monsters, Genesis was mistaken. Christians may fear that this is displaying some sort of pre-modern mythological component and thus somehow damages the trustworthiness of the bible because it is no longer "scientifically accurate." However, the modern reader can rest assured because there is a reason why God must create the sea monsters in Genesis.

Many people in the modern world enjoy sailing, fishing, or having fun in some other water sport. What is necessary to understand, is that the people of the Ancient Near East did not look at the water as a fun place to cool off from the rough desert heat.[89] The waters were the primordial place of chaos and fear. There were evil gods and evil sea creatures birthed by the waters of the abyss.[90]

Close to the human world, there were magnificent sea monsters that dwelt in the chaos of the sea. One of those sea creatures was the Leviathan.[91] So why does the author of Genesis 1

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[89] I remember once while I was doing ministry work in Tanzania taking a picture of the sunset, and some of the locals laughing at me. I asked why, and they said Americans always take pictures of sunsets, mountains, and the wilderness. They said for them, the wild is something to fear. Not something that one would want a picture of. Having to cross a mountain is dangerous, and they thus thought of the sun setting behind a mountain differently.

[90] See the Babylonian creation story: Enuma Elish.

[91] John Day. "Leviathan." Edited by David Noel Freedman. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

include the fact that God created sea monsters? Again, the theme of monotheism emerges. Who is the one that creates even the monsters? Who is it that sees even the monsters of the deep obey? It is the God of Genesis 1, and this God is again, fundamentally different than all others. He is more powerful than even the mighty sea monsters, because he created them alongside the rest of creation.

As mentioned earlier, in the Ugaritic texts, the Leviathan personifies the waters of chaos.[92] This means semiotically, the Leviathan functions as something more than just a great sea serpent. The monster that is the sea is the bigger problem. But again, new semiosis takes place in the biblical account. The sea monster no longer points to the chaos waters, now the sea monster points to a creature in submission to a sovereign God. The monsters of the deep are now merely a part of the created order; and possibly even more startling than that, God declared these creatures “good." There are no powers of the deep at war or odds with this God. There is nothing but goodness and creaturely submission to the wise and good rule of the God of Genesis 1.

This is similar, but also different to something that takes place in in the Babylonian Hymn to Shamash. In the hymn, it recalls that the sun god receives worship from the terrible sea monsters.[93] The similarity is the fact that you have the great sea monster in submission to a deity. The difference is that in the biblical account the sea monsters are “good.” When God looks at them, he says, “good.” They are not in defeat submitting to the deity; they are created in goodness and exist in peace in the created order.

At this point, the patterns of Genesis are becoming clear. There is one God, who is a good God, and he creates environments for the flourishing of their occupants. Next, we turn to the last

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[92] Ibid

[93] John H. Walton and Victor Harold Matthews, *The Ivp Bible Background Commentary : Genesis--Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 29.

day of creation. The sixth day is important for many reasons, but chiefly for the creation of humanity. It is here that we see the ultimate use of semiotics. There is not a single more important instance of semiosis in all human history than what occurs on day six. God Himself, puts his sign into the world.

THE ULTIMATE SIGN—HUMANS AS SEMIOTIC REALITIES

On day six, the creator of all things puts his "sign" into the world. Humanity, by its very nature, is an occurrence of semiosis. When you see a human being, you are seeing an "image' of the God who created them. Nothing else in all of the six days of creation has this role. Humans are the zenith and pinnacle of the created order. This is why semiotics is so important, our entire species in fact, semiosis of divine intention. However, many questions remain: What does it mean to bear the image of God? How does one do that? What did the author expect the first readers of Genesis to hear? As with everything else in this paper, the added lens of semiotics will help the interpreter. It is when the historical, grammatical, canonical tool belt is also equipped with semiotics that so much additional meaning can rise to the surface. What then is the image of God, and how would the author of Genesis expect us to understand it?

Before getting into the common interpretations and examining what they might have to offer, some commonly overlooked groundwork must be laid. Recall to mind that God creates functionally different equal opposites in Genesis 1. They are pairs that are not at odds, but different objects that join together to produce a unified one. Light and darkness make day one. The waters above and the waters below make day two. The land and sea make day three. This pattern continues to play out and ultimately finishes with a crescendo that is the last pair: man and woman. Genesis 1:26–27 reads, "Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens

and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."*

When reading these verses, it has been common to turn to philosophy and leave the biblical text behind in trying to understand the meaning of this "image." Many attempts to discover key differences between humans and other components of creation are made. Concepts like conscious, conscience, and ethics are often discussed. Although there is a time and place for those discussions as we shall see, it is a mistake to leave the biblical text behind in this search.

The first question we should ask is: if humans are made in the image of God, what has this particular God been doing at this point in the story? If the only information you have at this point is the first chapter of the Bible, what do we already know about this God from that chapter? If all you had was Genesis chapter one, what information would you have about the character of this deity, and what might that reveal about being made in his image?

Genesis 1 clearly wants its audience to know some things about the God that it is revealing. The author makes it abundantly clear by repeating key words. God is not just simply creating in the first week; God is dividing, separating, gathering, naming, observing, and declaring goodness. A good exercise that demonstrates this is to go through the first chapter of Genesis and highlight all of the repeated words. Since the ancient authors did not have highlighters, they would use word repetition to accomplish this same task. Similar to a teacher of elementary students hinting at what is going to be on the test by repeating key concepts several times in the hour, biblical authors use repetition to draw your attention to that which is most

important. It is no wonder that in Genesis one, it states twice that humans are created in the image of God, and twice states the command to have dominion.[94]

All of the key words in Genesis 1 point to something significant regarding the God revealed on page one. This God is both artist and engineer. He is a God who works, and this working God establishes the mode of being in which all human vocation will flow. This idea is then immediately picked up in the second chapter of Genesis where the new humans are given roles, functions, and jobs. What does that look like? It looks a whole lot like the God revealed in chapter one. Humans manage and tend to a garden, they name things, and they are called to create themselves. In other words, the human's work strongly resembles God's work. This is to be expected if humans are the image of the God who created them.

The implications of this are massive. Humans, like God, have the ability to introduce beauty into the world. Humans organize and divide; they gather and separate. Humans name things. God created out of nothing, but humans take the substance that God gave, and mold and shape it in order that they might introduce new beauty into the world. God divides and separates and puts things in proper order. From art to engineering, it is on the first page of the Bible that all human vocation is given opportunity. Everything humans do reflects what God has done in creation.

Semiotically, when you look at a human working, you are to see the same mode of being displayed by God in the creation week. Human work points to the work of God. This lays the groundwork for a preliminary understanding of the image of God. However, this only begins to

[94] This same repetition emphasis is seen in the New Testament when Paul focuses in on the Gospel. 1 Corinthians 15 is the closest example the New Testament offers to a formula of the Gospel and it twice mentions "according to the scripture." It was incredibly important for the first Christians not to divorce Christ form the Old Testament. Jesus was the long-awaited answer to everything the Old Testament was longing for.

scratch the surface of all that is going on semiotically with the image bearers. We can now examine the various understandings of the image of God and explore how semiotics might aid their interpretation.

CURRENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE IMAGE OF GOD

There are many different ways that interpreters have approached the image of God, there are however a few major streams of thought. The first is often called the substantive view. This view states that there are properties that are fundamental to human beings that separate them from the rest of the created order. Humans, by nature, have certain abilities, properties, and capacities that make them unique. Historically, this has often been associated with the cognitive capacity of reason and the volitional ability of freedom. In other words, humans are rational and free creatures. This understanding is seen in the early church fathers and carries all the way through the medieval theologians and the modern era. For example, as early as the second century, Clement of Alexandra writes:

> "For the image of God is His Word, the genuine Son of Mind, the Divine Word, the archetypal light of light; and the image of the Word is the true man, the mind which is in man, who is therefore said to have been made "in the image and likeness of God,"2 assimilated to the Divine Word in the affections of the soul, and therefore rational; but effigies sculptured in human form, the earthly image of that part of man which is visible and earth-born, are but a perishable impress of humanity, manifestly wide of the truth.[95]

The polymath monk, John of Damascus writing in the 8th century said:

> "Since this is so, God created man out of visible and invisible nature with his own hands according to the image and likeness, forming the body from the earth and through his own breathing upon it giving it a rational and intellectual soul, which we call the divine image. That which is "according to the image" is manifest in the intellect and free will.

[95] Clement of Alexandria, "Exhortation to the Heathen," in Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire), ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 199–206.

> That which is "according to the likeness" is manifest in such likeness in virtue as is possible.[96]

One can see, for John of Damascus the image is the rational and intellectual soul. He goes even further and sees the very order of creation reflecting this:

> But that volition is implanted in man by nature is manifest from this. Excluding the divine life, there are three forms of life: the vegetative, the sentient, and the intellectual. The properties of the vegetative life are the functions of nourishment, and growth, and production: that of the sentient life is impulse: and that of the rational and intellectual life is freedom of will. If, then, nourishment belongs by nature to the vegetative life and impulse to the sentient, freedom of will by nature belongs to the rational and intellectual life. But freedom of will is nothing else than volition. The Word, therefore, having become flesh, endowed with life and mind and free-will, became also endowed with volition.[97]

The substantive view was common among the church fathers and medieval theologians. It still finds prominence today and resonates with modern culture in that it values the intellect, freedom, and the individual. For right or wrong, this cultural overlap makes the substantive view a dominant view among Christians today.[98]

A more recent view of understanding the image of God is the "relational view." The relational view holds that humans are image bearers because they relate to God and each other. There is an "I-Though" relationship between the image and the one whose image they bear. The most known name associated with the relational view is Karl Barth.

For many who hold this view, the image of God must first be seen as something rooted in the triune God. God by nature has always existed in eternal relationship. The Father has always

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[96] Louth and Conti, 35.

[97] John Damascene, "An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," in St. Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, vol. 9b, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1899), 58.

[98] In my personal experience, I have never heard any other view taught in the local church context.

loved the Son, and the Son has always loved the Father. Although God is one in nature and essence, there remains a subject/object distinction between the Father, Son, and Spirit. These three persons have always experienced relationship, and that relationship is one of love. John 17:24 reads, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world."

The relational view thus, can turn to the nature of God to understand creation and the creation of image bearers. The Christian tradition can say God is love, precisely because God is triune. This relationship of love becomes the blueprint for all of creation. Jonathan Edwards, although not commenting on the image of God, captures this sentiment in discussing why God created. Edwards says:

> God's aim in creating the world was Himself. But because this God's very self is so different from that of any others, that means something utterly different from what it would mean with other gods. This God's very self is found in giving, not taking. This God is like a fountain of goodness. So seeking Himself mean seeking himself diffused and expressed. In other words, He is seeking to have himself, his life and his goodness shared. His very nature is about going out and sharing of his own fullness.[99]

Gregory of Nyssa echoes the words of Edwards:

> He creates man for no other reason than that He is good; and being such, and having this as His reason for entering upon the creation of our nature, He would not exhibit the power of His goodness in an imperfect form, giving our nature some one of the things at His disposal, and grudging it a share in another but the perfect form of goodness is here to be seen by His both bringing man into being from nothing, and fully supplying him with all good gifts: but since the list of individual good gifts is a long one, it is out of the question to apprehend it numerically. The language of Scripture therefore expresses it concisely by a comprehensive phrase, in saying that man was made "in the image of God": for this is the same as to say that He made human nature participant in all good; for

[99] Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity : An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 47.

> if the Deity is the fulness of good, and this is His image, then the image finds its resemblance to the Archetype in being filled with all good.[100]

In other words, God eternally exists as an outpouring of relational love within his own nature. The Father pours his love and goodness into the Son. This "pouring" is poured out into the created order so that other beings might likewise share in the relational goodness that has been shared within the Godhead for all eternity. This is a unique contribution by the Christian tradition to monotheistic understandings of the nature of God. In other monotheistic constructs, God is isolated and exists monolithically without relationship. Aristotle thought that if there was nothing alongside of God, then there was nothing for God to be good to; he therefore articulated an understating that God eternally created alongside of Himself in order that there might exist something he might be good to.[101] With a triune understanding of the nature of God, this is unneeded.

It is out of this Trinitarian understanding of the nature of God that many Christian interpreters form their articulation of the image of God. Critics would point out however, that this view makes the "image" something external to the creature. The creature bears the image of God as relationship occurs. It is not a quality that they possess internally or inherently by nature, but it exists externally and is tied to the other. This is a significant departure from the substantive view.

Similar to the substantive view, the relational view adds much to the conversation and I believe does contribute to forming a proper understanding of the image of God. It is however

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[100] Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man," in Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Henry Austin Wilson, vol. 5, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1893), 405.

[101] Reeves, 40.

lacking. It is lacking not because it is entirely wrong, but it does not have enough color to paint the full picture and develop a robust and fully formed understanding of the image. The third major view does not rise from philosophy or psychology, but rather is built by the historical-grammatical method of interpretation. It takes the context of the Ancient Near East very seriously. The third major view of understanding the image of God is called the "functional" view.

The functional view states that humans have a role or vocation in the created order, namely, to rule and have dominion. There is diversity of thought in what that exactly looks like, but one of the best articulations of this is presented by John Middleton. Middleton places the "image" in the context of the ancient world and sees the biblical vision for image bearing as a "democratized royal rule."[102]

The functional view looks to the other Ancient Near Eastern sources to find parallels between the biblical usage and language of the image of God. Proponents point out that in surrounding Mesopotamian and Egyptian cultures, there was a clear meaning for "image of God." The image of God belonged to the king. Matthew Levering commenting on Middleton's work writes, "with regard to the Egyptian examples, he observes that the notion of image is but one among many other ways of expressing the pharaoh's divine origin and kinship to the gods. The notion is distinctive, however, in that it picks up specifically on the central function of the king, namely, his cultic, intermediary function of uniting the earthly and divine realms."[103]

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[102] J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image : The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005).

[103] Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation : Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 163.

Succinctly said, the image signified the divine rule. When you looked at a king, you were meant to see the implementation of the will of a deity. Much like an image in a temple points to a god behind the image, the king is the image of the god.

The Hebrew word for "image" at this point is significant. The word used for image in Genesis 1 is צֶלֶם/selem. It is used for the image of the God revealed in Genesis, but it is also used for the image of false gods. A צֶלֶם /selem could be a statue, carving, or idol that represents a deity. For example, in 2 Chronicles 23:17, the text reads, "Then all the people went to the house of Baal and tore it down; his altars and his *images* they broke in pieces, and they killed Mattan the priest of Baal before the altars." In this case the *images* of Baal were idols.[104] In a similar passage, Numbers 33:50–52 reads:

> And the Lord spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal *images* and demolish all their high places.

Again, the images are associated with false idolatrous worship. An interesting use of the word is found in 1 Samuel 6:5: "So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel." Without getting into the details of the story, the Philistines were commanded by their own priests and diviners to make "images" of tumors and mice. The text says they were to make them out of gold. This means the images were like statues or "pictures" of what they stood in place of. This is how the word is used again and again in scripture. A selem/image is a picture of the object in which it stands in place of.

[104] There is also another Hebrew word used for idol, nevertheless these "images" were being used in the Baal Cult.

Returning to the historical task, ancient deities had images of themselves in temples; they also had images of themselves on the throne. This is how the semiotics of it all works. Idols, images, and kings are all signifiers of the signified deity they stand in place of. They are pictures of the deity. It is therefore a political statement to refer to a royal as an image of God; it grounds and justifies their rule. It becomes very difficult to challenge the king if one believes the king is in some sense the will of a god.

It was therefore in the best interest of the royal to make sure his people knew the logic of image bearing. Ancient rulers knew the power of semiotics. They used signs across their territory to reinforce their political might. It is very difficult for the modern person to understand the magnitude in which the "image" rhetoric was amplified. For some rulers and peoples, the king as the image of a deity, was stated in every possible way: in cultic activity, statues, monuments, and architecture.

For example, the temple of Karnak which is the second largest religious site of the ancient world, is teeming with this semiotic life. Outside of the temple, there still stands a monument that places an image of the pharaoh directly in front of the image of a ram. The ram was the sacred animal associated with the chief god of the pantheon, Amun-Ra.[105] The image is meant to communicate something powerful and is much more than royal decoration. When you see pharaoh, you see a god. Pharaoh is the image of a god on earth. Pharaoh is the mouthpiece of Amun-Ra. One of these giant statues would be enough to communicate the point, but that was not enough for the Egyptians. The point must be communicated again and again. For this reason, there was not just one statue, the Egyptians literally lined the roads with these "images." In the

[105] Coulter and Turner, 43.

case of Karnak, the road that is lined is 3.5 kilometers.[106] The images of Pharaoh were built with such care that they still stand today. One can visit them and take this 3.5-kilometer journey yourself.[107] The road leads to the main temple complex of Karnak, and as you walk it, the images are on both the right and the left. Step after step the images are reinforcing the semiotic point: pharaoh stands in place of Amun-Ra. The temple of Karnak is a semiotic explosion. Everywhere you look, you are reminded of exactly who bears the image, and it is not you.

It was important to establish the Pharaoh's authority, not solely for political reasons, but for something even more important. Pharaoh was not just charged with the task of maintaining order in the society; he was charged with keeping the cosmos in balance. The gods use their image on earth to maintain "Maat."[108] Maat is the Egyptian concept of order and is the antithesis to disorder and chaos. When Pharaoh performs the cultic rituals, and when he does them properly, order is maintained in Egypt. The gods, through their image, have set up sacred cultic activity to maintain order and balance in the world.[109]

This is reflected in much of the architecture. For example, at the entrance to many temples, there were giant pylons. Together they were meant to mirror the hieroglyphic for

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[106] Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 2048.

[107] Trek Earth, "Avenue of the Sphinxes," accessed 3/17/2021. https://www.trekearth.com/gallery/Africa/Egypt/Inland/Luxor/Karnak/photo1330393.htm.

[108] Jan Assmann, "Pharaoh's Divine Role in Maintaining Ma'at (Order)," The Torah.com, accessed 3/17/2021. https://www.thetorah.com/article/pharaohs-divine-role-in-maintaining-maat-order.

[109] Shlomo Biderman and Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Interpretation in Religion*, *Philosophy and Religion,* (Leiden ; New York: E.J. Brill, 1992), 89.

"horizon."[110] Many were stationed so that during morning rituals the sun would symbolically rise out of the horizon.[111] Since the sun does not rise in the exact same spot every day, there was room for some flexibility, however to this day, travelers go to Karnak on the morning of the winter solstice to see the sun rise perfectly between the two central gateways.[112] This, again, is the power of semiotics. The rising of the sun over the pylon communicated something clear to the ancient observer. It said, "what is done in this temple, gives rise to the sun." Order is maintained by the cultic activity of the pharaoh and his priests. Pharaoh makes the sun rise, Pharaoh makes the sun set; the gods, through their image bearer, uphold Maat. At this point some very importance nuance is needed. Although Pharoah was said to do these things, it is not that in his own power he made the sun rise and set. Jan Assmaan clarifies, "the cult was essentially human performance in which the gods and goddesses benevolently participated."[113] They do this by "indwelling in the cult images" that the human hands had made.[114] This makes for extremely powerful semiotics to the ancient observer.

Consider what an ancient person might ponder as they observed the pylon structure of Karnak. In front of the temple of Khonsu, a pylon that measured 34.5 meters long and seven

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[110] Yale Peadbody Museum of Natural History, "Looking through the Pylon," accessed 3-16-2021. https://echoesofegypt.peabody.yale.edu/overview/narrative.

[111] The Global Egyptian Museum, "Pylon," accessed. http://www.globalegyptianmuseum.org/glossary.aspx?id=304.

[112] Jeff Burzacott, "This Is No Normal Sunrise," Nile Magazine, accessed 4/17/2021. https://www.nilemagazine.com.au/2015-december/2015/12/22/this-is-no-normal-sunrise.

[113] Assmann, 53.

[114] Ibid.

meters wide stood.[115] Inscribed in the Pylon it reads, "the first high priest of Amun, master of the rites, Pinedjem, son of the first high priest of Amun, Piankh, has made this very great and august pylon for his father Khonsu."[116] The pylon ties the history of a particular family to the gods. All of this is meant to communicate powerful meaning.

Additionally, there were relief scenes of war depicted on the pylons. The images usually showed Pharaoh being observed by the gods as he slays and conquers his enemies.[117] Again, the point is the same, the Pharaoh is the image through whom the gods work.

Imagine making your way into the temple complex. The roads are lined with the Egyptian "image of god." There are giant statutes and monuments that display it. The massive entrance is a symbol of Pharaoh maintaining Maat; making the sun rise, defeating his enemies and exercising his wise rule. The semiotics of this are powerful enough to shape your very world-view, and that is exactly what they did.

It is in that world that Middleton finds the locus of his understanding of the image of God. Genesis does something radical with the ancient person's understanding of an image of God however; Genesis democratizes this royal vocation. It is no longer solely the king who bears the image, but all humans who are created to be a part of the royal priesthood. Humans then have a sacred vocation; a vocation to extend the wise rule of the God whose image they bear. This move universalizes human dignity. The functional view then compliments and works hand in hand with what was previously established at the opening of our discussion on image bearing,

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[115] R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz et al., *The Temples of Karnak* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 1999), 653.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Museum,

namely that human image bearing should look like what the God of Geneses 1 was doing in the week of creation.

This idea is that when you look at any human in sacred vocation, one should see an implementation of the will of God. The image (the signifier) points to God (the signified). This concept is also expressed in a similar way by NT Wright. Wright uses the image of an angled mirror to describe the phenomena.[118] The analogy states that humans function as mirrors. When one looks at a human/mirror that is facing them, they only see themselves. The mirror reflects back the individual looking into the mirror. However, the intent of bearing the image of God is that the human/mirror is set at an angle so that when one looks at the mirror, they also see the image of what the angle presents. Wright recalls, "I remember when I was a small boy being ill in bed, and my mother lined up a mirror in the doorway of my room so that through that mirror I could see her and other family members coming and going in the hallway outside my room so that I didn't feel so isolated and alone. And the point about the angled mirror is that you can see in both directions."[119] The concept works the same way but the two spheres that are connected are not a mother and a child's room, but rather Heaven and Earth. The angled mirror forces one's gaze vertically; you see the human and the angle forces your eyes toward heaven, and thus, to the one whose image they bear. This is similar to what was taking place at Karnak with the Ram behind the Pharaoh. The semiotic meaning of those statutes was that the viewer was not just

[118] N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began : Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion*, FIRST EDITION. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016), 94.

[119] N.T. Wright, "Being an Image Bearer with N.T. Wright," BioLogos, accessed 3/17/2021. https://biologos.org/resources/being-an-image-bearer-with-n-t-wright.

looking at Pharaoh, there was a deity behind the Pharaoh. The ancients knew the power of semiotics. The optics were made crystal clear.

The functional view leads us to seeing all humans in similar light as ancient cultures saw their kings. The king was to do the will of the gods on earth in the domains they were given rule. This means the image is not stagnate, but it has a function, namely, to rule on behalf of the god. Interestingly, this is the same type of language found in the Genesis creation account. Humans are to exercise dominion and rule over creation. Specifically, they are to exercise this rule over, "the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."[120] Humans are to exercises dominion over the occupants of the environments that were created on days two and three of creation. The occupants of day four are not listed. The lights in the sky are not for humans to engage.

Here we run into a massive problem. The problem has to do with the various ways the Hebrew word רדה/radar is translated in the various translations in English. All of these words: subdue, dominion, rule, or reign invoke a gut-level resistance from many modern readers. This is particularly pronounced in the North American context.

When people hear words like "rule" and "dominion," it can have a negative connotation. This is because throughout human history there have been many horrible rulers. History is filled with bad kings, dictators, and tyrants. Looking at the North American context, the United States was founded on a rebellion and a separation from the crown. The modern person in this context was birthed in an anti-institutional and hyper-individualistic culture. This culture shapes how words like "dominion" and "rule" are read and perceived. When American viewers watched the recent cinematic adaption of Les Misérables, they took the side of the peasants before they knew

[120] Genesis 1:26

anything about the king in which the peasants were revolting against. No thoughts were given to the possibility that the king might be a good king. The default understanding of a modern American is that if the people are hurting, it is because the king must be to blame.

This problem is further amplified with postmodernism's critique of power. People are highly suspicious of power to the extent that anyone who holds power, is assumed to be guilty of something. This makes it incredibly difficult for the biblical narrative of creation to be read in proper light. The abuses of power by nations, peoples, and individuals haunt any reading of dominion-like language, including that of the bible.

It is however important, to let the text drive our understanding of what a given word means in light of the biblical context it arises from. It is important to return to the God of Genesis 1 to establish how the image bearers ought to rule and exercise dominion. As previously discussed, what God is like in the first chapter of the Bible should inform the reader on what it means to bear the image of this God. Not only does God create; he divides, separates, gathers, speaks, and names. He also is seen consistently and continually as good. The repetition of God creating goodness is abundantly clear, and this should inform our understating of image bearing.

If we humans are to have "dominion," then that dominion should reflect the dominion exercised by the God of Chapter 1. This God does not war with others, nor does he create havoc. He does not do wrong, he does not commit evil; he is a God of truth, goodness, and beauty. Human rule ought to look like this; like God's rule in Genesis 1. Humans are the delegated authorities over God's creation. For this reason, humans are to be wise and good rulers and like an angled mirror not only point toward God, but also in reverse, reflect back God's goodness into the created order. Humans are to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven; and as Middleton

notes, “It is significant, in this connection, that while humans are granted rule over the earth and the animals, there is no mandate in Genesis 1 for humans to rule each other.”[121]

This is how the functional view is enhanced by semiotics: the human is the signpost pointing to God. Humans are not just angled mirrors in a stagnate sense, but as they perform their sacred vocation, they reflect back the glory and goodness of God into the created order. It is not just a human standing still performing the task of the angled mirror, but a human in action, a human in sacred vocation. They are the delegated authority of the image of whom they bear. Middleton captures this concept:

> “This democratization of Mesopotamian royal ideology serves to elevate and dignify the human race with a noble status in the world, analogous to that of royalty in the ancient Near East. Yet the imago Dei is not simply an affirmation of static status or privilege. Essential to the meaning of the image in Genesis 1 is the dynamic power or agency that God grants humans at creation (signified in the terms rule and subdue).[122]

One can see a similar idea expressed in delegated family responsibility. Picture a mother and father who own a home. The home belongs completely to them and no one else. After some time, they decide to have a child. As the child gets older, they give the child more responsibilities, and at a certain point, a day will come when this mother and father begin to use language such as “clean *your* room.” Does the room belong to the child? No, not really. The room and the whole house for that matter belong to mom and dad. However, they are delegating authority and granting a sense of ownership to their child. In the teenage years, that child may say something like, “get out of *my* room.” In which case, mom and dad can exercise their sovereign authority over the whole house and say, “excuse me, you don't get to talk like that.”

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[121] Middleton, 204-05.

[122] Ibid.

The mother and father can then step in and exercise their rightful authority. The child's authority is granted to them, but it can be taken away. Additionally, there are consequences that the parents can administer to punish or teach the child how to properly manage their room. The point is, however, that when the child properly manages their room in a way that reflects the will and rule of mom and dad, there is nothing but peace in the house.

Semiotics, in partnership with the historical task, helps demonstrate that the image stands in place of the divine ruler. There are significant implications of this the that would have been seen as radical at the time of composition of Genesis. Jürgen Moltmann writes, "This derivation itself contains revolutionary political potential: it is not a prince who is the image, representative, deputy and reflection of God; it is the human being—men and women in like degree, all human beings and every human being."[123]

The functional view, relying on historical-grammatical tools clearly can partner with semiotics to further bring clarity to its articulation of the image of God. With that said, I do think the functional view can be expanded and find harmonization with the insights from the substantive and relational view. Often, interpreters find themselves in a dilemma by trying to "pick" one view. This happens when interpreters force themselves into deciding that one view is entirely right and the others entirely wrong. A wise approach, however, is that sometimes there might be a dominant view, but that dominant view can be given needed clarification and nuance by other interpretations. In other words, a functional view can be enhanced by the substantive and relational view.

[123] Jürgen Moltmann, God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 219.

Matthew Levering who holds to the substantive view, points this out while critiquing Middleton's view of the democratized royal image. He states, "To share in God's rule—Middleton's royal image—requires that humans share in a finite way in the infinite divine perfections of intellect and will. It is logically necessary that human nature possess intellect and will in order for humans to image God's royal rule.[124] In other words, the functional view can only work because the substantive view is presupposed and used as a foundation. The very fact that humans can function in a certain manner is dependent on them having by nature, something that allows them to function in that manner. A certain quality must precede whatever action a human might do.

Likewise, Aquinas is able to solve one of the most prominent weaknesses of the substantive view by inserting portions of the relational view into his own understanding of the substantive view. One of the major issues facing the substantive and functional view is the critique that asks, "what happens when humans do not perform the function of image bearing properly? What if they are incapable of performing the function? At that point, do they cease bearing the image? What happens when someone does not have the cognitive capabilities to exercise reason and will? If someone is put in a vegetative state, do they cease to be the image of God? Levering responds to this concern with Aquinas and the church fathers saying:

> that for Aquinas (and the fathers), even if the powers of the soul are not in act or are unable in this life ever to be in act due to a bodily defect, the grace of the Holy Spirit can still transform the soul and elevate the person relationally to union with the persons of the Trinity. By being united to God through the infused habits of faith and charity, a severely mentally disabled human being can share in God's rule even in the present life. Indeed, since the capacity to share in God's rule characterizes the image of God, it is only if the image of God is in the embodied rational soul that humans who endure severe mental disability can be created in the image of God. The key is that the soul, even when it lacks

[124] Levering, 175.

> the bodily capacity for knowing and loving, retains its ability to receive infused relational habits that enable the human person to share in God's sovereignty.[125]

This is how a harmonization of the views can occur. The views are not necessary at odds with each other; rather there exists space for them to complement each other. Middleton is right in his demonstration of how the 'image" language was used in the world of the bible. This is reflected semiotically in the art, architecture, cultic activity, and the social life of the ancient world. Semiotics only further sharpens the strength of the functional view. However, the reason humans even have the ability to "function" in this way is because they by nature hold to something substantively. The function and substance do however exist in a relationship to the unchanging Triune God. Semiotics aids all three understandings in that it shows just how powerful "image" usage was.

The power of the "image" and its semiotic usage can then be traced from Genesis into the rest of the bible. Human beings are unique in the six days of creation. There is nothing else like them in all the created order. This is why, for the remainder of the biblical narrative, God hates image making. The second commandment forbids the making of any graven images.[126] Why does God detest this so much? The reason is because God has already put his image into

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[125] Ibid.

[126] Exodus 20:4–6: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

creation. Idols are an affront to both God and his sacred creation. Walter Brueggemann states, "There is one way in which God is imaged in the world and only one: humanness!"[127]

Humans are an act of semiosis. They exist as a sign pointing to a greater reality. It is of utmost importance that we allow all the information to inform our understanding of image bearing. The semiotics of the ancient world, and semiotics applied to the biblical text help inform a robust understanding of the image of God. Again, a similar pattern can be seen. Genesis speaks of one God, who is good, and in the case of the image bearers, has created humans to continue his good works in the created order.

Before moving on from the image bearers, there is another layer to humans and image bearing. An act of semiosis that occurs when the humans complete the pattern of functional different equal opposites. Just as a human is an act of divine semiosis, when humans as male and female come together, additional semiotic work is occurring. This act of semiosis is not made explicit in Genesis 1, but as we shall see, was noticed afterwards by later biblical authors.

GOSPEL SEMIOTICS IN THE MAN AND WOMAN

As previously mentioned, man and woman form the end of the creation of pairs that are functionally different equal opposites. Every day of creation sees the repetition of this pattern. Light and darkness come together and make a day. The waters above and the waters below are established in day two. On day three, we see land and sea function as a pair. This pattern continues until the last pair of functionally different equal opposites; the woman bearing the image of God and the man bearing the image of God.

[127] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, *Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 32.

They too, like the other pairs are meant to come together. In fact, it is a part of the command. Imager bearers are to be fruitful and multiply. In other words, in sex there is a union between man and woman that is similar to the unions created on previous days. What makes the union between humans so unique is that in doing so, they obey the command and subsequently create new image bearers; when humans come together in this way something wholly new is created.

The image bearers much like God in Chapter One remain nameless. God is simply Elohim, and the images bearers are simply man and woman. It is not until Chapter Two and Three that we get the names of YHWH, Adam, and Eve. Chapter Two also builds upon the sexual union between the man and woman when it states, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.[128]

This idea of "one flesh" resonates with light and darkness making "day one" and all the other pairs of creation. Heaven is meant for earth; and man is meant for woman. The special union that is semiotically embodied in sexual union points to an even greater reality. When later biblical authors look back at the union between man and woman, they see much more going on. While Paul the Apostle is reviewing household codes for the Christian family, he takes a detour and reviews the union between a man and a woman and makes a radical claim. Ephesians 5:31–32 reads, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." Paul quotes Genesis and then declares that what was occurring way back in the

[128] Genesis 2:24–25

beginning is actually a profound mystery; a mystery that says the original marital union was actually pointing to a greater union.

An individual human as an image bearer points to God, but two image bearers together in union are an act of gospel semiosis. Marriage is thus, an institution embedded in the created order, that functions as a signpost pointing to a greater reality, namely, the marriage of Christ and his Church. Earthly marriage is the shadow cast by God's love for his Church. Whatever humans experience in marriage, however great it may be, an earthly marriage is but a glimpse of what is to come.

There are many implications to this, but one incredibly important insight is that marital and sexual union was always a good thing made by God to point to something better. So many have gotten this union wrong and see it as a consequence of the Fall. Throughout history, sex and the physical intimacy experienced between man and woman have been looked down upon. So much harm has been done to the proper understanding of human sexuality due to this. The bible sees the signifier (male/female union) and the signified (Christ/Church Union) as both being good. The one good points to the greater good. Historically, many have looked at male/female sexual union as a late necessary consequence to sin. This degrades the beauty of the union established in Genesis 1. Chrysostom sees sexual union in this negative light, and thus fails in understanding the semiotic reality at work. He writes:

> Consider when this happened. After their disobedience, after their loss of the garden, then it was that the practice of intercourse had its beginning. You see, before their disobedience they followed a life like that of the angels, and there was no mention of intercourse. How could there be when they were not subject to the needs of the body? So at the outset and from the beginning the practice of virginity was in force, but when through their indifference disobedience came on the scene and the ways of sin were opened, virginity took its leave for the reason that they had proved unworthy of such a

> degree of good things, and in its place the practice of intercourse took over for the future.[129]

Augustine, however, saw the union between man and woman in better light:

> This purpose was declared in the original creation of the world: "Male and female he made them. And God blessed them and said, 'Increase and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.' This reason for creation and union of male and female, as well as this blessing, was not abrogated after the sin and punishment of man. It is by virtue of this blessing that the earth is now filled with human beings who subdue it. Although it was after the expulsion of the man and woman from paradise that they came together in sexual intercourse and begot children, according to Scripture, nevertheless I do not see what could have prohibited them from honorable nuptial union and "the bed undefiled" even in paradise. God could have granted them this if they had lived in a faithful and just manner in obedient and holy service to him, so that without the tumultuous ardor of passion and without any labor and pain of childbirth, offspring would be born from their seed. In this case, the purpose would not be to have children succeeding parents who die. Rather those who had begotten children would remain in the prime of life and would maintain their physical strength from the tree of life that had been planted in paradise.[130]

Returning to a point previously made, humans and trees are like each other. The day three and day six connection is important. Before the Fall, humans and trees, were both to be fruitful and multiple. They both had "seed" to do so, and both were given this before the Fall. Exactly what sex, marriage, and procreation looked like before the "fall' is yet to be known. It, nevertheless, is established that these functions and purposes were present at the very beginning.

This is important for how Paul looks at marriage semiotically. The signpost of earthly marriage points to Christ and the Church; and this was always the intent. It was not as if sin occurred, and then God looked down upon the broken institution of marriage and had to figure out a way for it to be a metaphor of his love. Again, marriage is an institution embedded in the created order as a sign of the greater marriage to come. This is not simply an "allegorical" reading of the text. It is not saying that Paul looked back to find something that he could

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[129] Louth and Conti, 37.

[130] Ibid., 39.

allegorize into an image of the gospel. This inception, theologically, is the intentional introduction of semiotic meaning into creation. Paul is not saying this is his novel idea, he is saying that it is a mystery, but earthly marriage from the beginning has signified heavenly marriage.

This is another way in which new beauty is seen through the lens of semiotics. Humans are signs of the signified God. Humans together in marriage, form the sign that points to the signified, namely the love shared between Christ and the Church. This interpretation is not making marriage a simple allegory for something better. Earthly marriage is very much real and a concrete phenomenon in the created order, but that very real and concrete phenomena, points to something that is even more real and concrete.

The semiotics are able to work in this manner because God created with all of these end goals in mind. Vern Polythrees articulates the inner mechanics of how this works best. He writes:

> In this connection, and elsewhere in Genesis 1 as well, we should reckon with two complementary principles. First, God has designed analogies between himself and man. The analogies are real, and they are one aspect of the nature of the created order in its relation to God. Second, an asymmetric relation exists between the two parties. God is the originator and the archetype, while man is the imitator. Human actions are derivative. Man imitates not only in his actions, but in his very constitution. Theologians say that the Bible describes God "anthropomorphically," that is, by analogy with human nature and human activities. That is true. But the analogy works because God made man "theomorphically," in the image of God. The analogies between God and man are not an afterthought, and neither are they merely invented by human beings, as if to "patch up" a glaring deficiency in language. God designed the analogies from the beginning and intended that they would serve as one means by which we come to know him and think about his character. At the same time, God, not man, is the standard for knowledge. Our knowledge of God is derivative and incomplete in comparison with his knowledge of himself. The analogies give us real knowledge of God, but not exhaustive knowledge.[131]

[131] Vern S. Poythress, *Interpreting Eden : A Guide to Faithfully Reading and Understanding Genesis 1-3* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019), 147.

Biblically sound semiotics is thus, not simply making up creative signifiers and connecting it to some theological truth, biblical semiotics is able to see what God was always intending to mean, even if at some point it might have been mysteriously hidden. Biblical semiotics unlocks what has always been there.

THE SEMTIOCS OF "US"

Before leaving the creation of humans behind, a look at some of the language used by God in the creation process in needed. Genesis 1:26 states, "Then God said, 'Let us make man *in our image*, after our likeness.'" The important question at this point is, what exactly is being referred to by the usage of the word "us?" Semiotically speaking, what image ought to come to mind when reading the word "us?" What idea, person, or persons lays behind the word?

There have been various answers to this question throughout the history of the church. Gordan Wenham identifies at least six ways in which interpreters have tried to answer the question.[132] However, only three of the views are widely held and have been seen as possibly candidates through church history. The three major views all flow out of a unique feature used in the language. This unique feature was noted very early on and is one that has been called a language of "deliberation." Chrysostom explains:

> To begin, it is worthwhile to ask why God did not say, when the heavens were created, "Let us make the heavens" but instead, "Let there be a heaven.… Let there be light," and similarly for each other aspect of creation. "Let us make" suggests deliberation, collaboration and conference with another person. So what is it whose pending creation is granted so great an honor? It is humanity, the greatest and most marvelous of living beings, and the creation most worthy of honor before God.… There is here this deliberation, collaboration and communion not because God needs advice—God forbid saying such a thing!—but so that the very impact of the language of our creation would show us honor[133]

[132] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1987), 28.

Essentially, Chrysostom argues, the language of deliberation is adopted, in order that emphasis might be given to the creation of the image bearers. Gregory of Nissa further adds:

> This same language was not used for (the creation) of other things. The command was simple when light was created; God said, "let there be light." Heaven was also made without deliberation.… These, though, were before (the creation of) humans. For humans, there was deliberation. He did not say, as he did when creating other things, "Let there be a human." See how worthy you are! Your origins are not in an imperative. Instead, God deliberated about the best way to bring to life a creation worthy of honor saying such a thing!—but so that the very impact of the language of our creation would show us honor.[134]

This language of "deliberation" clearly puts emphasis on the imager bearers. Prior to this, God was speaking things into being in command like fashion: "let the dry land appear" However, now we have a first-person plural being used. It appears as if something more is going on. Interpreters at this point ask the question, "who is God deliberating with?"

One way to answer the question, is to say, that the "us" refers to God himself in his triune nature. This is a common interpretation of course in Christian circles. It has been an established understanding of the text from the church fathers to the present. The 4th century Latin poet Prudentius captures the idea well:

> Who taught the trembling mortal face to face,
> Revealing to him all His Majesty
> The inspired historian makes it very clear
> That at earth's dawn the Father not alone
> Nor without Christ his new creation formed.
> "God fashioned man," he says, "and gave to him
> The face of God." What but to say that he
> Was not alone, that God stood by God's side
> When the Lord made man in image of the Lord?

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[133] Andrew Louth and Marco Conti, eds., *Genesis 1–11*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 28.

[134] Ibid.

> Christ is the Father's image, we are Christ's;
> God made us in the likeness of the Lord,
> For in our likeness Christ would come in time.[135]

Likewise, Augustine expresses a similar idea not in poetry, but in prose:

> For God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness;" and a little after it is said, "So God created man in the image of God." Certainly, in that it is of the plural number, the word "our" would not be rightly used if man were made in the image of one person, whether of the Father, or of the Son, or of the Holy Spirit; but because he was made in the image of the Trinity, on that account it is said, "After our image." But again, lest we should think that three Gods were to be believed in the Trinity, whereas the same Trinity is one God, it is said, "So God created man in the image of God," instead of saying, "In His own image[136]

Clement of Alexandra follows in similar vein, but with an added distinction. He states that Christ is the true "image," and we are subsequently made "in that image."

> For the image of God is His Word, the genuine Son of Mind, the Divine Word, the archetypal light of light; and the image of the Word is the true man, the mind which is in man, who is therefore said to have been made "in the image and likeness of God," assimilated to the Divine Word in the affections of the soul, and therefore rational; but effigies sculptured in human form, the earthly image of that part of man which is visible and earth-born, are but a perishable impress of humanity, manifestly wide of the truth[137]

Fulgentius of Ruspe, the 6th century Bishop of Ruspe, may articulate the position in a theological manner best:

> Therefore let us hold that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are by nature one God; neither is the Father the one who is the Son, nor the Son the one who is the Father, nor the Holy Spirit the one who is the Father or the Son. For the essence, that which the Greeks call the *ousia*, of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is one, in which

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[135] Prudentius, *The Poems of Prudentius*, trans. Sister M. Clement Eagan, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 15.

[136] Augustine of Hippo, "On the Trinity," in *St. Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Arthur West Haddan, vol. 3, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 157.

[137] Clement of Alexandria, "Exhortation to the Heathen," in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 199.

> essence the Father is not one thing and the Son a second thing and the Holy Spirit still a third thing, although in person the Father is different, the Son is different, and the Holy Spirit is different. All of this is demonstrated for us in the strongest fashion at the very beginning of the Holy Scriptures, when God says, "Let us make human beings in our image and likeness." When, using the singular number, he says "image," he shows that the nature is one, in whose image the human being was made. But when he says "our" in the plural, he shows that the very same God in whose image the human being was made is not one in person. For if in that one essence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit there were one person, "to our image" would not have been spoken but "in my image." Nor would he have said "let us make" but "I shall make." If in reality in those three persons three substances were to be understood or believed, "to our image" would not have been said; rather, "to our images"; for there could not be one image of three unequal natures. But while the human being is said to be made according to the one image of the one God, the divinity of the Holy Trinity in one essence is announced. Then and shortly thereafter, in place of what he had said above, "Let us make human beings in our image and likeness," Scripture thus told of the making of the human being by saying, "And God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them." [138]

It is important to note at this point, when the church fathers speak of "deliberation," they are not saying that the members of the Trinity were in disagreement. Deliberation can often mean working through differences and trying to come up with a compromise. From the quotes above that is clearly not the intention of the usage of the word. It is to say, however, that special consideration and emphasis is being given to the creation of the image bearers.

This view as been extremely dominant in the history of the church. As noted by Keil and Delitzsch, "the plural *"We"* was regarded by the fathers and earlier theologians almost unanimously as indicative of the Trinity.[139] It is also from my experience, the on the ground explanation given in the local church context. Despite the dominance of this view, there are other ways of looking at the language.

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[138] Fulgentius, *Fulgentius*, trans. Robert B. Eno, vol. 95, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 63.

[139] Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 38.

Another understanding of the language is referred to as the "majestic plural" view. Geisler summarizes the view, "the plural is used as a figure of speech called a majestic plural. In this use, God is speaking to Himself in such a manner as to indicate that all of His majestic power and wisdom were involved in the creation of man. As has been noted, the plural pronoun "us" corresponds to the plural Hebrew word *elohim* which is translated God."[140] This is similar in concept to something that has been called the "royal we." For example, an angry response given by a queen might be "we are not amused." In this case the queen is simply saying that she is not amused, but the plural language is adopted to express her position, authority, and majesty.

The third view states that God is conversing with the angels. When God is speaking of "us," he is simple addressing previously created angels who are bearing witness to his creative acts. The idea that there were angels bearing witness to God's creative acts is not without biblical precedent as the book of Job speaks of spiritual beings rejoicing as they behold the creation.[141] In the broad sense, this interpretation refers to angels in general and not anything specific. However, I'd like to add specificity to the view, and talk about a specific set of spiritual beings that present a specific image. Semiotically, the image that a reader should have in mind when reading this passage is that of the "divine counsel."

The divine counsel is an image that appears also in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Succinctly said, the image is of deity on a throne surrounded by other subservient deities. In the center is the chief deity, but together they form a council. Kenneth Matthews states, "Impressive

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[140] Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 4 vols. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House, 2002), 31.

[141] Job 8:1-7

evidence from the Old Testament and parallels from Mesopotamian and Canaanite mythology point to the idea of a heavenly court where plans are made and decisions rendered."[142]

In the Genesis account however, the image is altered by the creation account's emphasis on monotheism. In many of the parallel accounts from the Ancient Near Eastern World, there are multiple gods on the council, even if there exists one that is chief among them. In the parallel accounts you have something similar to what occurred in the Enuma Elish. In that account, there were many gods, but Marduk became chief because he was able to defeat Tiamat. The idea is that there exist many gods and sometimes one is able to rise to the top of the pantheon, but there is not a clear ontological distinction between the deities. This is not the case however, with Genesis. Nahum Sarna argues:

> The extraordinary use of the first person plural evokes the image of a heavenly court in which God is surrounded by His angelic host. Such a celestial scene is depicted in several biblical passages. This is the Israelite version of the polytheistic assemblies of the pantheon—monotheized and depaganized. It is noteworthy that this plural form of divine address is employed in Genesis on two other occasions, both involving the fate of humanity: in 3:22, in connection with the expulsion from Eden; and in 11:7, in reference to the dispersal of the human race after the building of the Tower of Babel.[143]

The idea of God having a divine council is one that is controversial and has caused much confusion. Biblical scholar Michael Heiser has probably done more work than anyone on highlighting the council in the biblical texts. He has written extensively on this arguing for a more nuanced and fuller understanding of the spiritual realm.[144] My purposes are not to explore

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[142] K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, vol. 1A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 162.

[143] Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 12.

[144] Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm : Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, First edition. ed. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015).

all the theological implications of a divine council, but rather see how that image is presented in scripture and how it is being used in Genesis 1. Again, what is the image the biblical author is employing when using this language?

The image of a heavenly court is found throughout scripture. We see similar usage and the first-person plural in Isaiah 6:8, "And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." The question is: to whom is God asking, "who will go for us?" We know at minimum that there are other spiritual beings present in the Isaiahic scene, because there are seraphim there extolling the Lord.[145] This passage begins to paint a picture, and the picture is one that is more fully developed elsewhere in scripture. Psalm 82 adds much detail to the image of the council:

> God has taken his place in the divine council;
> in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
> "How long will you judge unjustly
> and show partiality to the wicked? *Selah*
> Give justice to the weak and the fatherless;
> maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.
> Rescue the weak and the needy;
> deliver them from the hand of the wicked."
> They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
> they walk about in darkness;
> all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
> I said, "You are gods,
> sons of the Most High, all of you;
> nevertheless, like men you shall die,
> and fall like any prince."
> Arise, O God, judge the earth;
> for you shall inherit all the nations!

A few important notes must be made. First, clarification must be brought to the statement, "in the midst of the *gods* He holds judgment." As previously stated, the English word

[145] The angels call out to one another saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"

"god" can be misleading. In Hebrew, the word being used is "elohim." Yes, the Hebrew word can refer to God or a god, but in the simplest sense, it just means spiritual being.[146] Context will determine exactly what type of spiritual being is being discussed. As far as Psalm 92 is concerned, all we know is that there are lesser spiritual beings surrounding the throne of God. We know they are not in the same position of YHWH, because he holds judgment over them. There is no polytheistic messaging here.

Second, these "elohim" were given some task or vocation to judge and give justice. The one true God is rebuking them in this passage for failing to do so in a right manner, especially to the weak. In light of this, the Psalm ends with God declaring, that though they are in fact "elohim," they now shall die like mortal men.

One of the more interesting places in scripture we encounter the image of the divine council is in the introduction to the book of Job. We read:

> Now there was a day when the *sons of God* came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the Lord and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the Lord and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.[147]

Here in the book of Job, we encounter a possible title for the beings that are in the heavenly court of God. In this passage they are called the "sons of god." The Hebrew word for

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[146] Michael S. Heiser, "Monotheism and the Language of Divine Plurality in the Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls," *Tyndale Bulletin* 65.1 (2014): 85-100.

[147] Job 1:6–12 (ESV)

"god" here is again "elohim. The phrase "sons of god" appears here and elsewhere in the scriptures. These sons of God seem to be in the presence of the LORD when Satan appears. There are many discussions to have about Satan and exactly what role, function, and purpose he serves in this heavenly scene, the point being however, is that again we see God surrounded by "elohim." This image again appears is Psalm 89:5-6

> Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord,
> your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones!
> For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord?
> Who among the *heavenly beings* is like the Lord,

"Heavenly beings" is the same type of Hebrew language found in Job. These spiritual beings are the "sons of god," and again we observe them being in the presence of God. With each of these passages more of the mysterious image of the heavenly council begins to take shape. Maybe the passage most clarifying to the image of the council, but most confusing theologically is I Kings 22. There are a number of issues the story raises, but for our present purpose focus to the scene must be given:

> **1**And Micaiah said, "Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, 'I will entice him.' And the Lord said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.' Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the Lord has declared disaster for you."[148]

Again, we see the same elements appearing in the same manner. Around the throne of God, there exist spiritual beings (elohim). In this passage they are called the host of heaven, in others, the sons of God. The spiritual beings appear to have some job, role, or function. In this bizarre

[148] 1 Kings 22:19–23

passage, a spirit comes forward and offers himself up to be a lying spirit in the mouth of the prophets. The story demonstrates how this spirit receives permission from YHWH before proceeding. This is similar to what took place with Satan in the Job story. One can not be certain about every detail, but the overall picture is becoming clear.

One final passage that is important for our present discussion is taken from Daniel 7, it reads:

> "As I looked,
> thrones were placed,
> and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
> his clothing was white as snow,
> and the hair of his head like pure wool;
> his throne was fiery flames;
> its wheels were burning fire.
> A stream of fire issued
> and came out from before him;
> a thousand thousands served him,
> and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;
> the court sat in judgment,
> and the books were opened.[149]

The focus should be on the last section when it states, "the court sat in judgment." This affirms what many of the other passages have pointed to. It also corresponds to the "deliberation" type language that was highlighted by the church fathers. What emerges from these various text is a composite image of the heavenly throne room. The throne room serves as the center of operations for God, and also is occupied by other spiritual beings that in some sense, participate in the judgments of God. This interpretation may create more questions than answers, but it nevertheless is the image the text has in mind.

[149] Daniel 7:9–10

Historically, there has been hesitation in adopting this view of the divine council. Interpreters fear the implications established might mean angelic beings are also made in the image of God, or possibly, that humans are made in the image of angels. Kenneth Matthew writes in his commentary on Genesis, "a difficulty with this view is the inclusion of angels in the phrase "our image" in 1:26. In what sense is the human being created in the image of angels?[150]

However, it must be pointed out, that the interpreter's job is to rightly discern what the text is communicating, not what one wants the text to say. Furthermore, even if one adopts this view, it does not necessitate angels being made in the image of God or humans made in the image of angels. Gordan Wenham summaries it best saying that, "let us create" "should therefore be regarded as a divine announcement to the heavenly court, drawing the angelic host's attention to the master stroke of creation, man."[151] In other words, the plural usage might be adopted to communicate a mere announcement made in the presence of God, his majesty, and the angelic council before him.

Some might argue there is not a real divine council. They would say that similar to other motifs taken from the Ancient Near East, the biblical authors adopt them to subvert them and in a rhetorical way, take a jab at other contemporary religious beliefs. This is close to the idea argued earlier in that the existence of "sea monsters" and is irrelevant to the point being made. Whether there exists a heavenly court, or the biblical authors are merely taking a common Ancient Near Easter motif, the point for this paper is nevertheless the same. The image presented is that of the throne of God surround by angelic beings and that is what we ought to picture as a reader.

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[150] K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, vol. 1A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 162.

[151] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1987), 28.

Theologians can sort out possible implications of spiritual beings that are made in the image of God, but suffice to say, from conclusions made in the paper regarding the image of God, it is not out of the realm of possibility that other spiritual beings might hold to this image in some sense as well. Could it be that there exists spiritual being who have rationality (substantive view), exist in relationship to God (relation view), and carry some vocation in the spiritual realm of exercising rule and dominion on behalf of God (functional view)? I believe this is certainly possible, and also believe this in no way harms the uniqueness of humans. In fact, in the passages reviewed regarding the divine council of God, it certainly appears as if they are given some ability to rule and judge. At minimum interpreters should be open to this possibility and not rule out this understanding.

There is much work to be done here, but all of our discussion is to point to an image established by semiotics. When the text says, "let us create man in our image," there is an image that should come to mind. That image is one of a King, surround by an angelic council. These spiritual beings are in creaturely submission to God, just like the rest of the creation. Does God need this council? No, of course not. Does God not need Adam to tend to a garden and name animals? No. Nevertheless, the God of Genesis is one that delegates authority to humans, and possibly others. This is mysterious indeed. But it is God himself in Job 38 who asks, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." What human was there, "when I laid the foundation of the world, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

THE SEMIOTICS OF REST

Although the "*rest"* of God does not appear until the beginning of Chapter Two, it clearly belongs in Chapter One. It functions as the end of the creation week and is not the beginning of

the second chapter's narrative. This has been argued and well established.[152] For that reason, I have included it in our reading of Genesis 1. Much like our discussion on the "image of God," our understanding of "rest" can come into better clarity when we look at "rest" with a semiotic lens alongside of traditional biblical interpretive tools such as the historical-grammatical and canonical methods.

What the ancient person pictured when they thought of "rest" was vastly different than what comes to mind for the modern person. Rest was a powerful image, and when a deity rested it meant something specific for the ancient audience. The semiotic concern is that modern readers have the wrong "image" in their mind when they think of God resting. This mistake, as we shall see, has significant theological implications.

For modern people, rest can mean slowing down, taking a break, or going on vacation. Sometimes it can mean removing some things from a crowded schedule. This is especially pronounced in the area I live. The Silicon Valley of California's Bay Area might be the busiest place in the world. Rest is not something that occurs for average residents. Rest, in this context, is likely seen as a short pause from busyness. Rest might mean watching a movie on Friday night to "unplug" from the day's work. Rest usually is when people take a break from work and engage in some form of entertainment. This, however, is not the biblical vision for rest. The image of rest that Genesis 1 is presenting is something quite different. Once again, a look in into the Ancient Near Eastern World is helpful at this point.

Maybe the most influential voice on the concept of rest in the creation account is John Walton. Walton identifies the fact that divine rest is a common theme in many creation accounts

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[152] Mathews, 176.

as well as literature dealing with deities. He examines these accounts to see how rest was seen in the Ancient Near Eastern context. When we examine the primary sources, a new image of rest begins to emerge. This new image is not at odds with traditional understanding of rest, but it does present a far richer and more robust image.

The Hebrew word used for rest in Genesis 1 is שׁבת/sabat. This is the word we get Sabbath from. In its most basic usages, the word means to cease or stop an action.[153] This is observed in many of its uses in the Old Testament. For example, Lamentations 5:15 reads, "The joy of our hearts has *ceased*; our dancing has been turned to mourning." In 2 Chronicles 16:5 we read, "And when Baasha heard of it, he stopped building Ramah and let his work *cease*." In Joshua 22:25, "For the LORD has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you people of Reuben and people of Gad. You have no portion in the LORD.' So your children might make our children *cease* to worship the LORD." As these examples and others demonstrate, in the simplest sense, to sabbath means to stop doing something. However, it takes on extra significant meaning in context for a deity who rests. The dictionary definition of rest gives us an outline, but the bible and the historical context will give us the color inside that outline.

John Walton states that in the Ancient Near Eastern world "rest" usually means, "a state that has been achieved through a particular action that was undertaken as a response to a condition or situation that prior to the divine action was usually viewed as unacceptable."[154] In other words, when something is not right in the cosmos, divine action must occur to right what is

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[153] Douglas Mangum, Brown, Derek, Klippenstein, Rachel, Hurst, Rebekah, *Lexham Theological Wordbook* (Bellingham, Wa: Lexham Press, 2014).

[154] John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 110.

wrong. Once the correction is made, then a deity can finally "rest." As long as the problem continues to exist, the deity or deities are unable to take their rest. Walton additionally notes that, "The common denominator in most of these cases is the divine rest provides a sense of security."[155] Security is the key word at this point. Security communicates an elimination of something that has potential to cause harm.

What might the problem be that could be preventing rest and security? There are a number of ways in which rest is prevented. There might be cosmic disorder, hard labor, noise and complaints from other gods, or a battle that needs to be fought. Whatever the issue may be, rest will not be attained until the problem is solved.

This understanding of rest can be seen in the Enuma Elish. Recall to mind our previous discussion on the epic myth. Apsu and Tiamat give birth to many gods and this disrupts the rest of Apsu. The children band together, and the text says they surge together and disrupt the peace of Apsu:

> The divine brothers banded together,
> They disturbed Tiamat as they surged back and forth,
> Yea, they troubled the mood of Tiamat
> By their hilarity in the Abode of Heaven.
> Apsu could not lessen their clamor
> And Tiamat was speechless at their [ways].
> Their doings were loathsome unto [...].
> Unsavory were their ways; they were overbearing.[156]

The behavior of the children so enrages Apsu that he decides he will do anything to stop the clamor. Apsu tells his advisor Mummu that he will destroy his children. What is critical for our present discussion is how this is all framed:

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[155] Ibid.

[156] Pritchard, 61.

"Their ways are verily loathsome unto me.
By day I find no *relief*, nor *repose* by night.
I will destroy, I will wreck their ways,
That *quiet* may be restored. Let us have *rest*!"[157]

This framing follows the same formula that Walton has laid out. A problem is presented that is preventing the deity from proper rest. The rest is so important that Apsu will kill his own children in order that he might have it.

Things do not go according to plan, however. A god named Ea defeats Apsu and slays him. Subsequent to this, Ea, along with his wife Damkina, give birth to Marduk who is born from the heart of Apsu. Then something fascinating occurs, the pattern for rest begins again. Tiamat is enraged at the killing of Apsu, and she gives birth to an army of monster gods that will defeat and avenge her slain husband. She creates an army and appoints Kingu to be their General and lead her newly formed forces. It is important to picture what Tiamat is creating. The Enuma Elish goes into great detail of what exactly composes Tiamat's army. The images are of a terrible and powerful army ready to wreak havoc on the gods:

They thronged and marched at the side of Tiamat.
Enraged, they plot without cease night and day,
They are set for combat, growling, raging,
They form a council to prepare for the fight.
Mother Hubur, she who fashions all things,
Added matchless weapons, bore monster-serpents,
Sharp of tooth, unsparing of fang.
[With venom] for blood she has filled their bodies.
Roaring dragons she has clothed with terror,
Has crowned them with haloes, making them like gods,
So that he who beholds them shall perish abjectly,
(And) that, with their bodies reared up, none might turn [them back].
She set up the Viper, the Dragon, and the Sphinx,
The Great-Lion, the Mad-Dog, and the Scorpion-Man,
Mighty lion-demons, the Dragon-Fly,
the Centaur— Bearing weapons that spare not, fearless in battle.
Firm were her decrees, past withstanding were they.

[157] Ibid.

Withal eleven of this kind she brought [forth].
From among the gods, her first-born, who formed [her Assembly],
She elevated Kingu, made him chief among them.
The leading of the ranks, command of the Assembly,
The raising of weapons for the encounter, advancing to combat.[158]

The army is made of monsters, and there will be no peace or security as long as they exist. The other gods, aware of Tiamat's rage, are terrified of her newly created army. At this point there is cosmic chaos, and the threatened gods need a champion that can restore order. Ea knows what is before him and is horrified. He seeks council and describes the situation before him:

"My father, Tiamat, she who bore us, detests us.
She has set up the Assembly and is furious with rage.
All the gods have rallied to her;
Even those whom you brought forth march at her side.
They throng and march at the side of Tiamat,
Enraged, they plot without cease night and day.
They are set for combat, growling, raging,
They have formed a council to prepare for the fight.
Mother Hubur, she who fashions all things,
Has added matchless weapons, has born monster-serpents,
Sharp of tooth, unsparing of fang.
With venom for blood she has filled their bodies.
Roaring dragons she has clothed with terror,
Has crowned them with haloes, making them like gods.[159]

Notice the mention of the fact that the army never ceases. Ea states that they plot while being enraged and set for battle without ceasing. The image is of a monster army growling and hungering for a fight day and night. Peace, security, and rest are impossible at this point. The image is bleak for Ea and his forces:

All the Anunnaki gathered at that place;
Their lips closed tight, [they sat] in silence.

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[158] Ibid., 62.

[159] Ibid., 63.

"No god" (thought they) "can go [to battle and],
Facing Tiamat, escape [with his life]."[160]

When all hope seems lost, they turn to the son of Ea, Marduk:

He whose [strength] is potent shall be [our] avenger,
He who is keen in battle, Marduk, the hero!"
Ea called [Marduk] to his place of seclusion.
Giving counsel, he told him what was in his heart.[161]

Marduk agrees to take on Tiamat and her army on the condition that if he wins he would be granted supreme authority over the gods. The deal is made and Marduk is preemptively crowned:

Joyfully they did homage: "Marduk is king!"
They conferred on him scepter, throne, and vestment,
They gave him matchless weapons that ward off the foes:
"Go and cut off the life of Tiamat.
May the winds bear her blood to places undisclosed."[162]

After this the epic battle takes place. Marduk meets Tiamat on the battlefield. Marduk makes his challenge:

Stand thou up, that I and thou meet in single combat!"
When Tiamat heard this,
She was like one possessed; she took leave of her senses.
In fury Tiamat cried out aloud.
To the roots her legs shook both together.
She recites a charm, keeps casting her spell,
While the gods of battle sharpen their weapons.
Then joined issue Tiamat and Marduk, wisest of gods.
They strove in single combat, locked in battle.
The lord spread out his net to enfold her,
The Evil Wind, which followed behind, he let loose in her face.
When Tiamat opened her mouth to consume him,
He drove in the Evil Wind that she close not her lips.
As the fierce winds charged her belly,
Her body was distended and her mouth was wide open.
He released the arrow, it tore her belly,
It cut through her insides, splitting the heart.
Having thus subdued her, he extinguished her life.

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[160] Ibid., 64.

[161] ibid.

[162] Ibid., 66.

He cast down her carcass to stand upon it.
After he had slain Tiamat, the leader,
Her band was shattered, her troupe broken up;
And the gods, her helpers who marched at her side,
Trembling with terror, turned their backs about,
In order to save and preserve their lives.
Tightly encircled, they could not escape.[163]

Marduk then binds all those who took part in Tiamat's army. He then takes Tiamat's corpse and creates the world. A problem presents itself, however. The gods now have work to do, and they do not like it. Marduk again is the man with the answers though. He announces his plan to Ea:

Opening his mouth, he addresses Ea
To impart the plan he had conceived in his heart:
"Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.
I will establish a savage, 'man' shall be his name.
Verily, savage-man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods
That they might be at ease![164]

We have previously stated how human beings were created in the Enuma Elish for the service of the gods, but now another element can be drawn out from this. Humans were created in order to give the gods rest. The central theme of ease and rest is repeated throughout. For example, in Tablet VI of the Enuma Elish we see the theme pick up again twice:

On the people he brought forth, endowed with life,
The service of the gods he imposed that these may have ease.[165]

And then again:

Let him purify their shrines that they may have ease.
Let him devise the spell that the gods may be at rest.[166]

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[163] Ibid., 67.

[164] Ibid., 68.

[165] Ibid., 69.

[166] Ibid., 70.

The Enuma Elish demonstrates how central the theme of rest was to its ancient audience. It is when Marduk rises as the champion who defeats his foes and brings peace and security to the world of the gods that they can finally have rest. This rest occurs because humans are created for those tasks. With the elimination of the threat, and others to do the work, there is stability and security in the cosmos. Which leads to another key image; Marduk can now sit on his throne and rule as King:

> The Anunnaki opened their mouths
> And said to Marduk, their lord:
> "Now, O lord, thou who hast caused our deliverance,
> What shall be our homage to thee?
> Let us build a shrine whose name shall be called
> 'Lo, a chamber for our nightly rest'; let us repose in it!
> Let us build a throne, a recess for his abode!
> On the day that we arrive we shall repose in it."
> When Marduk heard this,
> Brightly glowed his features, like the day:
> "Construct Babylon, whose building you have requested,
> Let its brickwork be fashioned.
> You shall name it "The Sanctuary."[167]

Notice the image that is being developed. Rest takes place in a sanctuary, in other words a temple. Additionally, rest runs parallel with ruling. Marduk will have a temple built so that he can take up residency and rule and rest from this location. Marduk resting is not him taking a nap ready to wake up and get back to work. The image presented is one of a king ruling, reigning, and resting over his conquered world.

Christopher Hayes points out that in both the Enuma Elish and the Memphite Theology, the gods are said to rule from their temples. He writes, "Marduk rules from his house in Babylon

[167] Ibid., 68.

and Ptah rules from his house in Memphis."[168] He also states that although these gods did indeed have influence outside of the cities their temples were housed in, nevertheless, the gods are presented literarily and ruling from a central location.[169] Again and again, gods take up rest when they sit on a throne and begin their rule.

A composite image is beginning to emerge as multiple themes converge. Rest occurs in the god's palace, his temple, after the defeat of some cosmic threat. The rest is depicted as the deity sits on a throne and begins their rule. The image is important. When one pictures rest, they should see a king on a throne, in their temple palace, ruling, reigning, and resting.

The images of sitting on a throne in a temple, while ruling and resting are also connected in scripture. Psalm 132:7–9 reads:

> "Let us go to his dwelling place;
> let us worship at his footstool!"
> Arise, O LORD, and go to your resting place,
> you and the ark of your might.
> Let your priests be clothed with righteousness,
> and let your saints shout for joy.

Notice that the dwelling place is where the footstool of the LORD is. Additionally, the resting place is the location where the king is to receive worship. Again, the same image is presented to the reader. A king, who sits on a throne, from where he rules, reigns, and rests. The Psalm continues in verses 13–14:

> For the LORD has chosen Zion;
> he has desired it for his dwelling place:
> "This is my resting place forever;
> here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

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[168] Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches : A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient near East*, First edition. ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 70.

[169] ibid.

Deities rule, reign and rest in their temples. In the dedication of the Solomonic Temple this is also clearly seen as Solomon prays, "Now, O my God, let your eyes be open and your ears attentive to the prayer of this place. "And now arise, O LORD God, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might. Let your priests, O LORD God, be clothed with salvation, and let your saints rejoice in your goodness."[170] The ark is the footstool in the temple for the king. It is the precise location where Solomon invited God into his "resting place." Does Solomon think God needs to rest from all the work he is doing? Does he think that God really needs a break from the pressures of being God? No, Solomon is inviting God into his divine rule and divine rest.

One can see the clear similarities between the biblical understanding of rest found in Psalm 132 and similar Ancient Near Eastern parallels. There are some important differences though. First, the God of Genesis 1 does not have a war before him. There is no ensuing battle. There is no massive problem before him. Rather, the peace of his Spirit hovers over the waters. There is no external problem to be solved. In Genesis, there is simply the task of creation before God. The empty canvas needs the painter to begin his work.

Another difference is that God does not need rest. In other accounts, the gods are in need or desire rest in some sense, and as previously discussed, sometimes the very reason humas are created is to do the work of the gods in order that they might rest. In the biblical narrative, this is so significant that in the giving of the Decalogue, God commands humans to join him in his rest. Exodus 20:8–11 reads:

> "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made

[170] 2 Chronicles 6:40-41

> heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Another major difference is that after God completes his work he does not enter into a temple. This is significant. Where will this deity be located? Listen to how Genesis ends the creation week. Genesis 2:1–3:

> Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. **2** And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. **3** So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

God finished his work and then simply blessed the day of his rest. Deities usually have temples erected to culminate their work and victory. In Genesis, no temple is built. This would make the ancient reader pause. Where is the dwelling place of this deity? Where is his temple? The answer is actually in the text. God dwells with man. Creation itself is the temple. The dwelling place of this God shall be with man. This dwelling place of God is hinted at in Chapter Three of Genesis when it says that God was walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

Of course, later in the biblical narrative a temple is built for God. However, everything in that temple reflects the original garden scene. The temple is a mini cosmos that reflects the original Edenic setting. Additionally, when the temple was built, everyone knew that the temple could not actually house the God of Israel. Solomon in his prayer at the dedication of the temple makes this abundantly clear. Solomon prays:

> "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O LORD my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' that you may listen to the prayer that your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.[171]

[171] 1 Kings 8:27–30

Notice Solomon's request is that God would have his eyes upon the house in both day and night. God will not be sleeping. God will be listening to the prayers of his people. He then will hear the prayers as the Sovereign King and implement his will. This is how the king takes up his rest. After defeating his enemies and solving the cosmic problem, a deity begins his peaceful rule in his resting place. The temple is the divine headquarters of his rule and reign. John Walton expresses the idea using an analogy of the White House:

> A temple is built in the ancient world so that deity can have a center for his rule. The temple is the residence and palace of the gods. Like the American White House, it is the hub of authority and control. It is where the work of running the country takes place. When a newly elected president looks forward to taking up his residence in the White House, it is not simply so he can kick off his shoes and snooze in the Lincoln bedroom. It is so he can begin the work of running the country. Thus in ancient terms the president "takes up his rest" in the White House.[172]

As mentioned earlier, the temple was built to reflect creation and draw one back to the garden. Semiotically, the temple is the signifier, and the cosmos is the signified. This is important because it communicates the kingship of God over all of creation. When you walk into the God of Israel's headquarters, it is meant to look like the whole world. Josephus speaking of the temple says, "In fact, every one of these objects is intended to recall and represent the universe."[173] He goes on at length to describe how the different aspects of the temple are recreating a mini cosmos. One example of this will suffice:

> Thus, to take the tabernacle, thirty cubits long, by dividing this into three parts and giving up two of them to the priests, as a place approachable and open to all, Moses signifies the earth and the sea, since these too are accessible to all but the third portion he reserved for

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[172] Walton, 70.

[173] Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, trans. H. ST. J. Thackeray, *The Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1961), 403.

> God alone, because heaven also is inaccessible to men. Again, by placing upon the table the twelve loaves, he signifies that the year is divided into as many months.[174]

There is a logic to all of this ordered below:

1. The temple is a sign that signifies the cosmos.
2. The Holy of Holies is the throne room of God.
3. The presence of God in the temple signifies His rule, reign, and rest.
4. Since God is ruling and resting in the temple, the signification is actually God's rule, reign and rest over all creation.

Once one is able to weave all of the themes together a composite image emerges. The image is of critical importance. The text says "rest" but what one pictures when they read the word "rest" is what matters. What is being signified for the ancient reader when they see the word rest? Do they picture a passive, inactive deity who is in a state of relaxation? Or do they picture a king who has brought order to a cosmic problem and is now seated on a throne and is ruling, reigning, and resting? Semiotically speaking, many have the wrong image in mind when they read the biblical narrative. This has significant theological and practical implications.

The God of Genesis 1 is not a passive, inactivity deity. In his rest, he is sovereignly reigning over creation. He is also beholding his creation. He views the work done on days one through six and declares them good. He is not an absent God akin to the deist god of modernity. He is an active participant delegating the responsibly of creation to his image bearers.

What then does this mean for humans? How does the rest of God in Genesis parallel the rest commanded to humans? What does a week of work and rest look like for God's image bearers? A story will help illustrate the idea.

I recently bought a home. It is a new home, and at least in my area that means the backyard is an empty piece of dirt. There is zero landscaping included in the package. So, I, as

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[174] Ibid.

the owner of the property, look upon the nothingness (tohu wa-bohu) of the backyard and begin to design, create, order, and work. I start by digging trenches for the pipes to run in because it will be absolutely essential to have water in the yard. I also bring in some lighting because that will be needed if I am going to have a backyard properly suitable for evening gatherings. Next, I bring in the grass, plants, and trees that I want to adorn the yard with. I set up some bird feeders to attract local wildlife. Anyone who does landscaping knows this is hard work. Let us also say the week was incredibly hot as well. So, picture difficult labor in the heat for the entire week. On the last day, as I finish the yard there is one last thing to do. I get the kids and tell them the yard is finally ready. I am just as excited as they are for them to see the finished product. As they open the back door they run and begin to play; running around on the lawn and looking at all the plants and trees. This next part is absolutely crucial in understanding rest. At this point, I pour myself a cold glass of lemonade, take out a chair, sit down, and behold my finished work. In this, I see my work and I am delighted, I am pleased. I say to myself, "this…is…good."

I am now in a state of rest. I am no longer working. I am looking over my creation resting and reigning over it. I am the king of my small kingdom. I am in a state of rest, but make no mistake about it, if my kids do something wrong, say they start digging up the new lawn, I reserve the right to intervene in my creation. This is the inner logic of rest.

Now, there is something fascinating regarding the divine rest of God; God creates a pattern of rest and invites human beings into it. They are to mimic the creation week, every week. Humans are to organize, divide, order, create, design and work for six days, and then on the seventh, they rest. They look at the work of their hands, see the goodness they have added to creation, and rest. In biblical times this was much more easily done and most everybody was tied

to the land. You work the land, and then partake of its goodness. On the sabbath you taste and see the goodness of your work; and in doing so, taste and see that the LORD is good.

In doing this rhythm of work and rest, humans are mimicking God in creation. This is also connected to our previous discussion on image bearing. The image bearers are to look like and imitate the one whose image they bear. Image bearers are to rule, reign, and rest over creation. God grants them this sacred role of caring for creation. He gives them this holy vocation and responsibility. Does God need humans to manage the earth? No! Of course not. Did God need Adam to name the animals? Did God need Adam and Eve to tend to the Garden? This answer is an obvious no. It remains important however, to demonstrate the radical departure of human work in the biblical narrative as compared to other creation accounts. In other accounts, humans are created to give the gods rest. In Genesis, God works and rest, and graciously invites human into this same pattern and mode of being.

Once again, we see the one good God of creation, creating a world for human beings to flourish in. He gives them real responsibility, but also maintains his sovereign kingship over the cosmos.

PART III: SEMIOTICS AND A WAY FORWARD

What then, does all of this equate to with interpretation regarding Genesis 1. Some preliminary points must be made. First, the ancient world was much more cognizant of semiotics. Architecture, cultic activity, social life and much more was specifically designed to communicate ideas. This was not only true of the ancient world, but all the way up until recent times at least in the North American context. For example, modern buildings are not intentionally designed to communicate transcendent truth. Utility is what runs the modern era. A

building now is designed to maximize production, output and profits. The modern warehouse is not constructed to communicate religious truth.[175]

Once we grasp that the ancient world was much more keenly aware of the power of semiotics, we should expect that they would be much more likely to intentionally employ semiotics. We might call this employment, semiotic rhetoric. The ancient person would persuade by using semiotics to assign new meaning. This is what we see time and time again in Genesis 1. We observed this with the sun, the moon, the stars, the sea monsters, the dry land, the waters, and so much more. These were not second tier meanings that are discovered on the margins. These meanings are primary. They would have been some of the first things noticed by the original recipients of this story.

Additionally, the first readers of Genesis, and all the biblical stories for that matter, heard the text read aloud. Imagine a father around a bonfire retelling for the fiftieth time, the story of Abraham and how his descendants would outnumber the stars. The father would tell his children to look up in the night sky and try to count the stars. He would ask, "can you do it, can you count the stars." The children would reply back and say, "we know Father, there are too many, and we know that our people will outnumber even these." This campfire story time, is a medium more in line with how people received scripture than any of our "bible studies." That is not to say that bible studies do not have their proper place; this paper is an entire exercise in biblical studies. It is however, to say that to properly "study" these stories one must be aware of the first ways in which they were communicated and received. The story went from mouth to ear.

[175] Although I do believe, unbeknownst to most, modern buildings are actually still communicating religious truth. We still build in light of our hierarchy of meaning. Pleasing the gods is no longer top priority, but rather turning a profit. This is reflected in much of our modern architecture. In other words, we still serve the gods.

Additionally, there were not personal bibles in every home. Even when we arrive at the time of synagogues, there might be one Torah scroll for the community. This meant you not only heard the text, but you heard it as an active participant and listened in a community. It was a corporate exercise. All this to say, is that when ancient people encountered the biblical stories, they listened and "pictured" things in their minds. What was pictured was formed and shaped by the world the first hearers lived in. If someone spoke of a sea monster, they were not wondering about the biological possibility of such life. They had images in their mind for sea monsters. Furthermore, the images often build a conceptual word, and the image embodies so much more than just the object described. Water is not just H20, but oftentimes, conceptually a realm of chaos. This paper has demonstrated this to be the case in a number of key areas in the creation account of Geneses 1. To be clear, this is neither an allegorical reading, or some way of getting out of the concerns of modern science. This is a look at primary meanings of the text. In other words, seeing the creation of the sun and moon as non-personal objects of creation rather than deities is primary. It is not a second tier meaning. The importance of this cannot be overstated, especially when addressing the problems the church is facing regarding interpretation in light of modern scientific discovery.

If one is concerned about faithfulness to the text, then that which is of most importance should be weighted the most heavily. My hope is that semiotics can help establish that which is most important, and thus, bring unity in the Church regarding interpretation of Genesis 1. My contention has been that modern readers bring modern questions to the ancient text, and that these questions were of little concern for the original audience. This is not to say the modern questions are not important, it is to say however, that it is difficult to get those answers from this text. When one understands the conceptual world of the Ancient Near East, it becomes very

difficult to maintain that an ancient reader would be bothered by something like the fact that a day is measured by earth's rotation around the sun, knowing that the sun was not created until day four. This is an exercise in missing the point.

Semiotics is a doorway into the conceptual world of the Ancient Near Eastern mind. Once one understands that the moon is never just the moon, and the sun never just the sun, so much of the creation account is unlocked. This is not simply a way out of addressing some modern concerns, it is a path to discover the truth, goodness, and beauty of the text that was always there. Like precious gold needing to be polished, the beauty was always there, just unseen by the modern eye. We hold the gold in our hands, but look at it thinking it merely some common rock. Semiotics is a lens by which the modern reader can discover anew the power and majesty of "In the Beginning."

When we apply this lens, we discover so much more of the primary meaning of the text. At first, one may be discouraged, thinking Genesis only answers "ancient questions." It gives answers to the questions that people "back-then" were raising. This however is far from the truth. Ancient people were asking questions that were fundamental to the human experience. It is we modern people that unknowingly believe modern questions are always the best questions. Underneath these ancient questions, however, are question that every generation is asking. Buried beneath every generational context, are questions all humans long to know. Questions that transcend whatever cultural context we might find ourselves in. That again, is the point of "myth" in the proper sense. Who are we? Where are we? Where are we going? What is our purpose? How does the cosmos operate? In our semiotic reading of Genesis, many of these questions are given answers, three however are worth focusing on.

MONOTHEISM, GOODNESS, AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

With the aid of semiotics, three main themes are established in the creation account. They are by no means new discoveries, but what semiotics does is demonstrate their preeminence in the text. Neither are these themes secondary, but primary. This will have importance later as we discuss the ongoing creation wars in the life of the church. They have to do with ultimate questions like: who made us? How does the cosmos operate? And who are we in light of that?

First, Genesis 1 establishes *monotheism*. There is only one Elohim in Genesis 1. He alone is there at the beginning. There are no rivals, no wars, no waters producing new gods. The God of Genesis is unique in comparison to all gods found in other creation accounts. Even in accounts that land on a chief god ruling over many gods, in those accounts you have a henotheistic understanding of the gods rather than a monotheistic one. For example, Marduk in the Enuma Elish rises to the top of the hierarchy, but he does so by defeating others. Marduk may function as the boss, but he is not the boss by nature. The God of Genesis 1 is ontologically in a class of his own.

The God of Genesis 1 is also in an "environment" of his own. There exists only peace as the Spirit hovers over the waters. This is important in establishing what reality and existence was like prior to creation. For all eternity, there only existed a being who knew not war, strife, or pain. All the pain, suffering, and brokenness in our world is there as an intruder to that which always existed. Our reality is the abnormal one. Even though creation is very old, the eternal standard is that which has always been. However long human suffering has been around, it is but a relative nanosecond to God's eternal being. We exist out of step with the way it was for all eternity. This again speaks to the type of God we are talking about and may give insight to the intended goals of this God.

Monotheism may not seem significant to the modern person, but that is because they have had a couple thousand years of the Judeo-Christian tradition shaping their thinking. The idea of there being only one god is a radical contribution the biblical text has given the world. Monotheism is one of the building blocks that gives rise to the belief that the universe operates in a consistent manner. There are not multiple deities changing things up behind the scenes. There is one sovereign ruler that created systems and environments that work continuously in a set manner. Time, weather, plant and animal life, all find their mode of being in their creation from this one God. These systems and their consistency give rise to our ability to observe and make predictions, in other words, one of the building blocks to the entire scientific endeavor is grounded upon monotheism.[176]

Semiotics aids us in seeing that at every corner of the creation account is a communication of monotheism. From the waters and formless void of its opening, to the creation of the greater and lesser lights; semiotics is giving new meaning to what the original signs were pointing towards. The signifiers of the ancient world pointed time and time again, to multiple deities. The biblical account assigns new meaning and now the signified is the absolute creaturely submission of all things in the created order. Lights, water, trees, and sea monsters all point to the oneness of the God of Genesis 1.

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[176] I realize many would contend that science is not in need of this foundation. I find it nevertheless completely unconvincing. Modern science is built upon many assumptions that ultimately cannot be substantiated outside of some theistic framework. In order to do science, you are running off a set of presuppositions.You are presupposing the universe is an observable phenomenon that is bound to obey certain laws. You are presupposing these laws are set in place and immutable. You are presupposing that you can trust your five sense to adequately observe them with something approximating accuracy. However, why should you trust your senses if you are a product of random chance? Why should your senses be constructed to accurately convey external reality to your mind? For all you know, your senses may only be concerned with something like your personal survival or personal pleasure and that does necessarily equate with truth.

The second major emphasis that semiotics helps us see is the goodness of God. Again, the modern person my not feel like this is a major contribution, but it is because we arrogantly and naively assume that if there is a god, that, of course, he should be good. This was not the default understanding of the ancient world, however. It is due again, to a couple thousand years of the Judeo-Christian tradition that modern people assume our deities ought to be good.

But why should anyone assume that God or the gods are good? Human beings certainly are not, and it does not appear that nature is always good either. This is why, for the most part, ancient people conceived of the gods on a moral spectrum. There were certainly ones that treated humans better than others, but as a whole, the gods could be more morally reprehensible than humans. A few brief examples will suffice.

Persephone was a goddess who while playing in a meadow was kidnapped by Hades and taken to the underworld where her hand was forced in marriage.[177] Pan was a god full of lust, he would lie and deceive to please his sexual appetite. When one would not respond to his sexual advances he would not stop; Pan would do anything to get what he wanted. For example, in one of the mythical tellings, a daughter of the goddess Hera named Echo, refused all relationships with men, including Pan. When Pan was not received by Echo, he had her torn to pieces.[178] Zeus condemned Prometheus to have his liver eternally regenerate every day, only to have his liver eaten every new day by a vulture. Prometheus was chained to a rock for all eternity so that this

[177] Coulter and Turner, 379.

[178] Longus, "The Pastoral, or the Loves of Daphnis and Chloe," In Parenthesis Publications accessed 3/17/2021. http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/longus_daphnis.pdf.

could occur anew with each passing day.[179] Chronos ate his children in order that none may usurp him.[180] One could go on with countless examples of the moral failings of the gods.

In the biblical creation account, there is nothing of this sort. The behavior of this God, again, is fundamentally different than all others. He is not filled with hate, jealously, or lust; he is simply concerned in Genesis 1, with creating a world filled with goodness. The biblical authors make this clear by having God review his work each day, and then declare what he made to be good.

One could go on with all the despicable behaviors of the gods. What is interesting is that humanity just accepted that this is the way it worked. Sure, some gods cared more for humans, and sure, some where better than others, but there was no expectation that higher beings should consistently be good. The fact the modern world just assumes that if there is a god, that this god ought to be good, is a demonstration of just how influential the biblical story has been. If there is a deity, why should he care about humans? Why ought he or she be good? And more specifically of concern for the humans, why should this God create a good world for them to live in? Which leads to a third major contribution of the creation account.

The third major contribution that the creation account gives the world is that it speaks of a God who intentionally creates for the benefit of humans. This flows out of point two being God's goodness, but this component specifically says that God created with the intention of creating an environment for humans to flourish in. The modern person does not realize how much of a radical departure from the other creation accounts this is.

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[179] Coulter and Turner, 391.

[180] Ibid., 135.

Nearly every major creation account from the Ancient Near East that deals with the motivation behind the creation of humans, tells of humans being created to serve the gods by doing the tasks the gods themselves did not want to do. In the Genesis account, human beings indeed have work, and in doing this work, serve God, but the work is done not because God is in need. The world is created so that humans can work like God. The work of God, parallels human work. In other accounts, the work is given to humans not because the gods care for them, but because they themselves do not want to do the work.

Recall to mind what was depicted in the Enuma Elish. At the beginning of Tablet VI Marduk responds to the god's complaint regarding their burden of work.

When Marduk hears the words of the gods,
His heart prompts (him) to fashion artful works.
Opening his mouth, he addresses Ea
To impart the plan he had conceived in his heart:
"Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.
I will establish a savage, 'man' shall be his name.
Verily, savage-man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods
That they might be at ease![181]

The gods have voiced some sort of complaint and Marduk, being the newly crowned chief of the gods must respond. How he responds is telling; Marduk creates man for the service of the gods. The point of the creation of humans is to "ease" the burden the gods have. In other words, man exists to benefit the gods, while in Genesis, God creates for the benefit of the human. This distinction cannot be overstated.

In many of the ancient accounts, humans are but tools to satisfy the needs of the gods. In Genesis, God is a good God who creates a world built for human flourishing. This holds significance in how humans see themselves in the world. For countless generations, one did not

[181] Pritchard, 68.

know if the gods were "out to get them." Who knew if you angered one? How did one know if you performed the demanded sacrifices appropriately? What is established in Genesis is an understanding that declares God is not *against* humanity, but *for* humanity. God is consistently good, day in and day out. When one believes this about God, it changes how you live and interact with everything and everyone. One does not have to worry if there is some god lurking around the corner out to get you. The God of Genesis is one who creates in order to bless.[182]

We now have three strands that form a braid. There is *one* God, this God is *good*, and he is *for* humanity. We see these three strands running through Chapter One. Nearly every single verse is touching on this in one way or another. The author draws the reader's attention to this in countless ways. The author does everything in their ancient literary tool belt to make these points clear. It is these points that are most crucial, fundamental, and primary.

With that being said, we do the text harm when we try and force 21st century questions into the text. There is a level of arrogance in this that is not often pointed out. The modern person, saturated in their hyper-individualistic culture, demands that Genesis answer the questions they raise in their particular culture, their particular time, and their particular place in the world. They do this with an assumption that those questions are obviously most important. There are countless combinations of time, place, and culture, that create unique sets of questions. What makes any one of those most important? This is not to say that Genesis does not speak into those particular questions. It is to say however, that those questions are not primary for the text.

[182] This is also demonstrated after the Babel narrative. God makes a covenant with Abraham in order that all the families of the world might be blessed. This idea that Abraham's decedents ought to bless all of the nations is then a theme carried out through the biblical narrative.

For example, I do believe Genesis has wisdom for how humanity ought to deal with technology and its relationship to humans. However, that issue is not the primary concern of the creation account. Genesis can speak to the ethics regarding AI and human assistance, but that was not what it first and foremost set out to do. Blaring loud and clear in the text is the message that there is one God, who is a good God, and this one good God created a world for human flourishing.

Moving forward, these primary themes give birth to three significant contributions that semiotics can give to the modern church. A tremendous gift can be handed to the church when one adopts the use of semiotics. The three gifts have to do with apologetics, church unity, and further biblical interpretation.

CONTRIBUTION ONE: APOLOGETICS

When I originally began to explore how semiotics might help interpreters regarding Genesis 1, I did not have apologetics on my mind. However, during the process and upon reviewing overall conclusions, I do see that a significant contribution to apologetics has been made. One of the most heated and controversial areas of apologetics has been creation.

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, there are many ways in which people both understand and defend the Genesis creation account. There is six-day literal creationism, day-age theories, progressive creationism, gap theories, theistic evolution and more. All of these are in one way or another, trying to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the text found in Genesis 1. These are attempts being made by sincere believers doing their best to present an intellectually fulfilling way of approaching the text.

One of the biggest weaknesses however has already been stated. Much of the time, these attempts are trying to resolve issues that modern scientific discoveries have raised. Hence, they

are always having to keep up with the ever-changing world of scientific discovery. This gets to the heart of the problem: science changes.[183] What we believe is "true" may change tomorrow. People with good intentions are trying to make Genesis fit in every place with modern scientific discovery. In doing so, they attempt to elevate Genesis above current consensus, but in doing this, they are actually forcing the text to submit to current human conclusions. Genesis however, scoffs, and sits above it all. It does not need to bend or flex to find acceptance by whatever a particular culture might be saying at a particular time.

Genesis sits above the discoveries of man. It speaks truth that every generation in every culture is in desperate need of. In order to live well in the world, one must have a basic understanding of the world they live in. Humans need to know what they are, who they are, and why they are here. Humans need to know their purpose; they must have a telos. These questions are not just ones that apply to our current generation, but to every generation. That is why no matter where you go into humanity's ancient past, you will find origin stories and myths attempting to explain the ultimate dealings of reality.

Genesis in this way, "sits" above many of the questions that arise with a particular place and time. It may speak into them, but it is not primarily concerned with them. This then, allows Genesis to not be forced into a fight with every new scientific discovery. It is not that the bible is "wrong" or written by ignorant ancient people, but rather Genesis 1 is such a highly complex, intricate, and beautiful piece of literature that it cannot be touched or harmed by the ever-changing nature of human knowledge. Genesis will not allow itself to be subject to the newest phase of human understanding.

[183] I do not mean that the scientific method changes. I mean to say that understandings and even the consensus can and does change.

Furthermore, does anyone actually believe that in two hundred years people will look back at us today and discover that humanity still believes exactly the same things as we do presently? This is foolishness. Humans today, do not believe many of the things we believed two hundred years ago, and in two hundred years we ought to have learned a few things. This allows Christians the space to not fear the progress of science.

If you force Genesis into humanity's current framework of understanding the world, you better believe you will be forced to do it again and again. I can remember feeling almost embarrassed when asked, "do you really take Genesis literally?" The question itself presupposes that Genesis is an ancient document written by people who had no understanding of how the world *truly* is. I now understand the Genesis in fact does record how the world *truly* is.

Secondly, regarding apologetics, there has been a recent shift in the type of apologetics needed. Traditional apologetics have dealt with issues surrounding truth (epistemology). Questions regarding the resurrection, manuscript reliability, and historicity abounded. Those are still important questions, there is however, a new need today. Many people now wrestle not with the existence of God, but with the type of God revealed in the Bible. They see him as an evil, capricious, jealous, hate-filled deity who is anti-woman, anti-science, racist and more. This is well documented by Dan Kimball, a pastor in California in his book, "How Not to Read the Bible."[184]

Kimball quotes Andrew Seidel saying, "the road to atheism is littered with bibles that have been read cover to cover.[185] In other words, is it the very character of God as presented in

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[184] Dan Kimball, *How (Not) to Read the Bible: Making Sense of the Anti-Women, Anti-Science, Pro-Violence, Pro-Slavery, and Other Crazy-Sounding Parts of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervon, 2020).

[185] Ibid., 1.

the bible that makes him unworthy of worship. This sentiment, as argued by Kimball, has been amplified by internet and meme culture. Countless memes that remove biblical text from their place in scripture to form a sort of "gotcha" point circulate the internet. They take many of the difficult passages in the bible and paint a picture of God, that if he does exist, would not be someone you would want to worship. In other words, is it not necessarily an attack first on the existence of God, but rather his character.

The responses to these critiques are beyond the scope of this paper, it nevertheless remains that at least with the starting point of Genesis 1, all accusations on the character of God must contend with the radical history altering claim, that in the beginning, God was good. If the biblical narrative begins with a God who is good and creates a good world for humans to flourish in, all later troubling passages must find their place in that narratival landscape.

Thirdly, regarding apologetics, a "telos" gap now exists in modern culture. By telos gap, I mean a meaningful purpose for living. Modern people divorced from the metanarrative that is established in Genesis continue to find themselves lacking meaning in life regarding ultimate things.[186] The question now is: "what's the point of it all?" What is the point, purpose, and end goal of human life? Without a proper grand-narrative to place ourselves in, we lack orientation, and our feet wander aimlessly.

In his highly influential, work Victor Frankle calls to mind a well quoted maxim of Friedrich Nietzsche that he translates as, "He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any

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[186] This is not to say that Genesis is the only book that can give meaningful purpose. Humans have always relied on similar narratives to give transcendent meaning and purpose to their life. This does not mean that every narrative is "true." It simply means, that these types of origin stories give the metaphysical substrate needed for people to understand reality and the world they live in. I say Genesis, because at least the modern North American context, that was the once dominant text that is now being abandoned.

how."[187] The problem is that the narrative that once gave structure and stability to our understanding of reality is being readily abandoned. In other words, we have lost our "why." This is not without dire consequence, however. Humans desire meaning and a "why" for life. Modern culture, in the North America context at least, is now incongruent with itself. We try to affirm meaning and purpose, but also, simultaneously sweep out the legs needed for meaning to stand upon.

Two messages currently broadcast around the clock in our culture. One message explicit, the other implicit. The explicit message says, "You are a wonderful, amazing individual with purpose, meaning, and value. The world is before you, so make the most of every day and be the person you want to be!" This positive, uplifting message sits atop a metaphoric ten-story building. The implicit message sits at the base, unnoticed but foundational, holding up the entire building. It says: "You are a product of random chance. You are nothing more than neurons, chemicals, hormones, and atoms. You have no soul. There is nothing beyond this life. No heaven. No hell. Nothing transcendent."

Despite what is broadcasted from the tenth floor, this foundation-level message speaks to the core of our being. It functions as an operating system. See, an experiment began roughly three hundred years ago in the modern world. The experiment sought to create a world divorced of God, transcendence, and anything other than the material world.[188] For the first time, humans attempted to find ultimate meaning and purpose outside of God.

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[187] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning : An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 84.

[188] I speak loosely here of the Age of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment brought much good, but it was not perfect, and in many ways, we are stilling living in the waters of some of its errors.

Despite the message that we tell ourselves, that we are special, unique and have purpose; underneath that, at the foundation, at the operating system level, is the message that says we are alone in the universe. Our feet wander aimlessly without meaning, on a planet that wanders aimlessly without meaning. We are here for but a fleeting moment and then death.

No matter how much we want to believe the message on the 10th floor, and no matter how much our pop songs, cheesy slogans, and Disney movies affirm it, it is nonetheless built on a foundation that says otherwise. We want to believe in things like love, but however we may conceive of it, the foundational message says it does not exist. Love is just chemicals and hormones firing off in our body to create a social contract between two individuals so that they might propagate the herd. Truth, honor dignity, those are just terms we use to describe animal-like behavior that benefits the tribe. We may assign meaning to all sorts of things in our lives, but make no mistake about it, they are not grounded in anything real. This foundational message is all-encompassing and incredibly powerful.

What is the result of this? Meaningless materialism is making us miserable. For example, despite Americans enjoying one of greatest standard of livings ever conceived, only 14% say they are “very happy” in life.[189] This is not to take a complex issue and oversimplify it by saying people are unhappy because they no longer believe the biblical creation account. The problem is incredibly complex with countless factors. The point is however, to say that at least one factor in the downward trend of contentment deals with the loss of meaning and purpose. Frankle and Nietzsche understood this.

[189] Associated Press, "American Are the Unhappiest They’ve Been in 50 Years, Poll Finds. ," accessed 4/19/2021. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/americans-are-unhappiest-they-ve-been-50-years-poll-finds-n1231153.

However, the nihilism created by materialism and loss of story, must contend with, "In the Beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." It also must contend with the claim of Genesis 1 that the one creator God was and is good, and that he did indeed create humanity with purpose and meaning. The story then becomes an apologetic in and of itself. Not so much as an argument that presents itself against materialism, but as a jewel to put on display and behold. Traditional apologetics often defend the historical claims of scripture, and this certainly is a worthwhile endeavor, but the apologetic I am articulating at this point is rather different. This apologetic, points to the emptiness of meaningless materialism, and then points to the beauty of Genesis and says, "which way modern man, which will you chose?" You can chose to live in the *toho wa-bohu*, or chose to live in the world that the God of Genesis 1 spoke into being. A world endowed with wonder, beauty, mystery, meaning, and purpose.

A semiotic reading of Genesis has aided the task of apologetics in these three key areas. Semiotics helps bridge the science and scripture divide, it helps establish the goodness of God, and it gives answers to the human longing of meaning and purpose. These three areas are of no small significance. They are areas the church must stand in and be able to articulate the beauty and truth of the Genesis creation account.

CONTRIBUTION TWO: FUTURE BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

As a byproduct of this semiotic reading, my hope is that a case is simultaneously made for semiotic use in the rest of scripture. If semiotics was so helpful regarding the first chapter of the bible, how much more help can come from its employment in the rest of sacred scripture. As demonstrated, the ancient world was much more cognizant of the power of semiotics. It was not used haphazardly, but with intention and purpose. If that is the case for Egypt, Mesopotamia, the book of Genesis, why not the rest of scripture? Should interpreters have their eyes attuned to

possible semiotic usage? The answer I believe is clear. The added lens of semiotics is of tremendous value to biblical interpreters. A brief example will suffice on how semiotics applied to other portions of scripture, can bring to surface incredible meaning.

In the second chapter of Jonah, we encounter a problem that is in need of semiotic clarification. At the end of Chapter 1 and in verse 17, Jonah is swallowed by a great fish. The Hebrew word for fish at this point is דָּג. However, in the very next verse at the start of Chapter 2 the fish is called a דָּגָה. The fish goes from being a "male fish" to a "female fish." If one is locked into needing to take every point as pure historical truth without the slightest touch of semiotic infusion, then one is left to try and harmonize the story. The results are ludicrous. For example, Rabbi Izkakais said that Jonah didn't pray in the male fish, which was larger, so it vomited him in the water and a female fish swallowed him.[190] In this smaller fish Jonah began to pray. Attempts to make sense of this in that manner abound. However, you can try and try, but will never come to anything remotely intellectually honest or satisfying. Modern people have a difficult time imagining a big fish swallowing a man, however, that is nothing compared to the fish that changes gender!

What are we to make of this? Are we left to try and figure out how this works both historically and scientifically? The answer is no, and all the clues are right in the text. The real gender of the fish is irrelevant; however, you better believe that at the start of Chapter 2, the author wants you to picture a female fish. *Even if the fish was male, you are supposed to see the fish as female.* Why? Because the belly of the whale is functioning semiotically and is no longer a belly of a fish, but rather, it is the womb of new birth. The text winks at the reader in case the

[190] James K. Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah : The Niv Application Commentary from Biblical Text-- to Contemporary Life*, *Niv Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004), 78.

reader does not see it right away. This is a clear case of semiosis. The gender of the fish now signifies something else.

The evidence for this is compelling. First, Jonah is swallowed up in death. Jonah may not literally die here, but he narratively dies. In 2:2, Jonah is in the "belly of Sheol;" consequently the "belly of death." Jonah is at the bottom of the ocean in the belly of the beast. He, for all intents and purposes, is dead. However, Jonah is not just in any "belly." The Hebrew word here is בֶּטֶן and the most dominant usage of the word in the Old Testament is not belly but rather, womb. Jonah is in the "womb" of Sheol awaiting new birth. Additionally, in 2:2 Jonah, "cries out to the LORD, out of his *distress.* The Hebrew here is the word צָרָה and is rightly translated as distress, anguish, or travail. The context of what type of distress is critical, however. In the Old Testament this "distress" is can be the "distress" that is associated with labor. In other words, the distress is possibly "labor pain" like language.

So, what is going on here? Is there a need to try and harmonize Chapter 1 and Chapter 2? Is there a need to figure out how a fish can change genders? Is there reason to believe that this is just another scribal error in scripture? Absolutely not. This is literature at its finest. It does not get any better than this. Jonah goes down down down…to the womb of death.[191] There he waits for his God to hear his cries; and it is in the bottom of the ocean, in the belly of the beast that God does indeed hear Jonah.

What then occurs? Of course, the womb releases Jonah into new life. Jonah is born again on the dry land. The word used for "dry land" in Jonah 2:10 is the same word we encountered in

[191] At this point in the Jonah story, Jonah has gone down to Joppa, down into the boat, down to the inner chamber, and down to the bottom of the sea. The story highlights this downward trajectory with repetition so that it can climax at the bottom of the sea in the belly of the beast.

Genesis 1:9 when the "dry land" appeared. This further proves the point that Genesis often functions as a semiotic dictionary for the rest of scripture. When the dry land appears in the text, there is a good chance the author wants you to see more than dry land, the author wants you to see new life.

Additionally, Jonah's name means dove. How do doves function semiotically in scripture? They are images of peace. Doves bring back the olive branch over chaotic waters.[192] So how is the character of Jonah functioning semiotically in the Jonah story. Jonah is God's dove, his peace offering to wicked Nineveh. With just a cursory glance of semiotics in the book of Jonah one can see how so much meaning is given the space it needs to rise to the surface.

This can be done in every book of the bible and should be. A semiotic reading of Genesis demonstrates the importance of semiotics in one chapter, but much more work remains. Hopefully, the work presented in this paper offers a case for this need, and hopefully others come to the task at hand.

CONTRIBUTION THREE: CHURCH UNITY

My original task was to see if semiotics might help provide an understanding of Genesis that would aid church unity in the North American context. The "creation wars" have wreaked havoc on the life of the Church and it is time for a way forward. Semiotics has clearly demonstrated that objects can refer to something beyond themselves in the biblical text. This is not an allegorical reading, but rather takes seriously the full richness of the meaning embodied in an object. The moon is not just the moon, the sun is not just a sun, and so on. Semiotics partners with the work of so many others who are demonstrating the primary meaning of the text. Together, they can bring into focus what matters most in the biblical text.

[192] Genesis 8:11

The debates surrounding proper interpretation have brought much division to the Church. This takes place on many levels. For some, the debates actually caused their church to split. For others, they watched how it tore their small group apart. Pastors have been accused of heresy for not reading the text in the exact way a congregation member thinks they ought too.[193] What if however, semiotics, working with many other fields, can demonstrate that the main focus of the text is not what our modern assumptions might think?

Could the Church rally around the key ideas revealed by semiotics? Could the Church focus on the fact that Genesis makes most clear the fact that there is one God, who is good, and creates for the flourishing of humanity? What if that became central, and other issues, important as they may be, became secondary? Could this help unity within the Church? My hope was that semiotics would help this process; and I believe it has.

Although many have different categories for what constitutes essential and nonessential truths regarding Christian doctrine, it is my firm belief that timelines regarding the creation week should not be in the "essential" category. It has been argued that it should be in the essential category because if you don't take the text "literally" then an abandonment of biblical inerrancy or authority has occurred. The arguments made in this paper should demonstrate the weakness in that notion. Thus, there should be a level of Christian charity regarding disagreements concerning the creation week.

It is time for the Church, at least in the North American context, to leave the creation wars behind. We can unite on what is most clear from the text. We can continue to explore that multifaceted diamond that is Genesis 1, but we can do it with grace towards one another while discussing differing interpretations.

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[193] I have personally seen and experienced examples of this.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as demonstrated in this paper, semiotics makes significant contributions in interpretation regarding Genesis 1. Additionality, the contributions made are of critical importance. The creation account found in Genesis 1 is under intense pressure. This pressure is coming from many different areas both inside and outside of the church. It is a critical time to establish a more full and robust understanding of the account.

This semiotic reading of Genesis 1 has been an attempt to navigate the difficult waters of reading such a unique text. Indeed, there is nothing else like Genesis Chapter One. Furthermore, as argued, Genesis creates the narratival landscape for all of scripture, its interpretation therefore, is of utmost importance.

In the semiotic reading presented in this paper, significant inroads have been made that can help both the individual interpreter and the Church. For the individual interpreter, semiotics allows the reader to go wherever the text may lead. Signs, by nature, point to something beyond themselves. Semiosis, therefore, by definition is following the text wherever it may lead. This means one does not have to feel as if they are being disloyal to the text in semiotic interpretation. Furthermore, it allows one to be intellectually honest and integrous with finding meaning in something beyond the basic meaning of a word; the sun is not just a sun.

For the church, semiotics has created a path for further unity. The creation wars have done tremendous harm to the body of Christ. It is time to let down our guard and see that Genesis 1 is not primarily about dates, times, and chronology. Those are important discussions to have, but in making that the main point, we are missing the point. Genesis 1 speaks of the oneness and goodness of God. It speaks of the wonderful world he created for his image bearers. When the church can center on that, so many of the smaller issues can become adiaphora.

Additionally, the insights that semiotics helps draw to the surface should demonstrate the need of semiotics in biblical interpretation. The biblical authors were much more cognizant of the power of semiotics, and thus we should expect them to employ them all the more. There are countless more semiotic readings of the biblical text needing to take place. There is still so much to be discovered, so much gold to find, and so many diamonds to unearth; to this task future interpreters should turn.

For now, this paper has demonstrated the power and beauty of semiotics applied to Genesis 1. In the midst of this power and beauty, challenges to both the existence and goodness of God abound. Additionally, concerns regarding science and faith are indeed many. However, in the midst of all the challenges and concerns of the modern person, the ancient text of Genesis boldly declares, “In the beginning God.” It is to that claim, that every person must contend. The church should speak with confidence, and not timidity regarding the claims of Genesis 1. The truths established by the text transcend whatever the current scientific consensus may be, and more importantly, give answers to the deepest of human longings.

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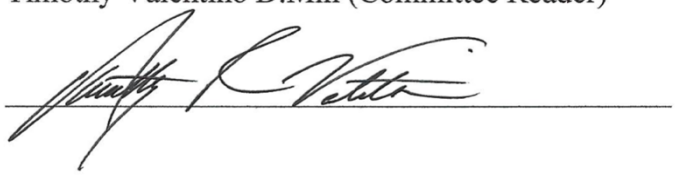
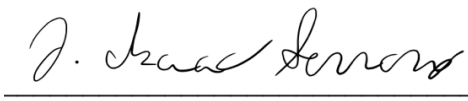
APPROVAL PAGE

Leonard Sweet Ph.D (Committee Chair)

Dan Kimball D.Min (Committee Reader)

Timothy Valentino D.Min (Committee Reader)



Isaac Serrano III (Author of Paper)

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